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## "All day waiting": causes of conflict in refugee shelters in Germany

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# **“All Day Waiting”**

**Causes of conflict in refugee shelters in Germany**

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## SUMMARY

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This *Working Paper* argues that conflicts in refugee shelters in Germany can largely be attributed to structural causes. These include the asylum regime, the interplay between the physical layout and social relationships within refugee shelters, and the specific properties of the refugee accommodation system, which can be regarded as a “total institution”. Further, there are other causes of conflict, which can be located at the personal level.

On the basis of a qualitative survey, we worked with more than 200 participants in 33 refugee shelters operated at state and municipal level across the federal state (Land) of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). Based on the data collected, we analyse five types of conflict: Conflicts at the individual level, group conflicts, aggressive behaviour and criminality, domestic and sexual violence and conflicts between residents and staff as well as conflict between institutions.

The hypothesis that reported cases of conflict represent more than a mere collection of isolated cases was confirmed. Instead, conflict can usually be ascribed to certain interrelated root causes. Participants themselves were often unaware of the processes at work here. We therefore recommend a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention that takes both structural and personal causes of conflict into account. In this manner, the shelter situation could be improved significantly for refugees and staff.

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This research was also made possible thanks to the authorisation given by numerous municipalities and several Bezirksregierungen (regional administrations), to whom we would also like to express our gratitude. We would also like to thank all of our interview partners, including social workers, social carers, caretakers and security service staff, cleaning staff, representatives of churches, Muslim communities and other religious organisations, staff from local and district authorities, counselling centres and NGOs, and volunteers. All of these took the time, despite their often busy schedules, to describe their perspectives on life in refugee shelters (RSs) and to speak openly about their own learning processes and the difficulties that still exist. In the academic community we owe our thanks to Dr Nicole Bögelein (University of Cologne), Dr Annett Fleischer (MPI, Göttingen), Dr Sarah Jahn (University of Bochum), Professor Dr Alexander Loch (Ludwigsburg University of Applied Science), Professor Dr Philipp Misselwitz (TU Berlin) and Professor Dr Ulrich Wagner (University of Marburg) for their participation in a workshop at the end of April 2017, at which they discussed this Paper, bringing their expertise from different disciplines to the table. Inga Zimmermann (University of Bochum/formerly on the Refugee Council NRW) also generously commented on the draft as did our colleagues at BICC. We would also like to make special mention of Lena Schellhammer, who actively supported the project throughout in her role as student assistant.

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<sup>1</sup> \ This study covers the period 2016–2017 and focuses on the state of North Rhine-Westphalia only, one of Germany's 16 federal states.

## Main findings

### Conflicts in refugee shelters have structural causes

Collective refugee shelters are prone to conflict for structural reasons. First, the asylum regime leads to the formation of hierarchies among residents. These hierarchies are created, to a significant extent, by the respective legal statuses of residents and the resulting differentials in access to job opportunities, language courses and support structures. The lack of transparency in processing arrangements, the uncertainty, the differences in waiting periods and in the time required for official notification cause a feeling of unfairness and competition. These become drivers of conflict.

Second, the way that the physical space in refugee shelters (RSs) is laid out causes conflicts. Asylum legislation prescribes that all asylum-seekers must live in RSs; the large majority of these are collective refugee shelters in which residents live for an average of one to two years. Rooms, sanitary facilities and kitchens frequently have to be shared with strangers. Lack of space, crowded living conditions and noise are the norm. There is barely any privacy, and a feeling of insecurity is widely reported. At the municipal refugee shelters, in particular, residents have hardly any means of keeping themselves busy or of maintaining a daily structure to their lives, especially since access to the job market is difficult. Furthermore, residents face the constant presence of strangers, which again can drive conflict.

Third, RSs are similar to what the sociological literature describes as “total institutions”. People who live in these institutions share certain characteristics (in this case a refugee background). They are more or less cut off from the rest of society, their rights are limited, and they are supervised by the institution's staff. As a result, residents experience a loss of self-esteem and are deprived of their autonomy. The resulting dissatisfaction can again cause conflict.

### Accommodation and asylum arrangements radically curtail personal autonomy

Life within a refugee shelter can deeply curtail an individual's autonomy. While rules for living in shelters (house rules, fire safety, etc.) are undoubtedly necessary for orderly cohabitation, they impact on the self if they prohibit elements critical to identity, such as furnishings. As in a total institution, they also impact on the individual by prescribing their conduct (Goffman, p. 51). In cramped conditions, in particular, many people react with a strong need to withdraw, but RSs offer no space at all for withdrawal. In a situation where strangers are forced to live together, conflicts are often sparked by issues of cleanliness in shared bathrooms or kitchens.

The asylum system and its procedures are also problematic in this respect. While applying for asylum, applicants must provide details of deeply personal and sometimes traumatic experiences. This procedure again leads individuals to feel a loss of autonomy, sometimes combined with a sense of disempowerment or deprivation of rights.

### Traumas often remain undiscovered and untreated

People who were forced to flee their homes have mostly had traumatic experiences, although not all of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, the insecurities associated with the uncertain outcome of the asylum procedure, as well as the frequent experience of inadequate accommodation, lead to a situation in which individuals continue to experience trauma after their actual displacement, so that the prerequisites for personal stabilisation are poor. Due to staff shortages, insufficient assistance and the absence of support structures, many cases of PTSD go undiscovered. PTSD can then develop further and result either in withdrawal and isolation or in heightened agitation and even aggression. Substance abuse, addiction and self-harm can be consequences.

## Competition between groups can lead to conflicts

In RSs, our analysis showed that groups are formed on the basis of shared origin, language or religion. This can become problematic if, at the same time, there is limited access to goods or resources and groups find themselves in competition with one another. Unequal access and competition between groups are produced, on the one hand, by the asylum system itself. One example is access to integration courses, which people with “good prospects of remaining in the country” enjoy, while others do not. The latter have to rely on language courses that are organised by volunteers and tend to be in short supply. On the other hand, competition can also arise when staff fail to treat people equally, such as when certain groups—e.g. from the staff’s own country of origin—are favoured. However, even though group formation is a phenomenon found in all RSs, the characteristics of and potential for conflict differ from case to case. Unlike often assumed by staff, this study showed that group formation processes cannot be generalised. For example, in almost every shelter, staff assumed that certain nationalities would inevitably be at conflict with one another—but notably, reports on which nationalities were allegedly at odds with one another differed from one shelter to another, and they did not correspond to the perception of residents. Instead, competition as created by the asylum and shelter system seemed to be a much more important factor in creating group conflict.

## Aggression and criminal behaviour are often connected with substance abuse and poor asylum prospects

Aggressive behaviour and criminality are often connected with substance abuse and poor asylum prospects. Aggression and criminal behaviour can be the result of conflicts at the individual level or between groups, but they can also be the cause of conflicts. In most shelters, both forms of behaviour were reported, but they were limited to few residents. When aggressive behaviour occurs and criminal acts

are committed, it is often in conjunction with substance abuse and poor prospects of success in asylum applications. Frustration (for example over the perceived unfairness of the asylum system), cramped facilities and boredom due to the absence of any structure to daily life can lead to consumption of alcohol or drugs, which can end in mounting aggression. In many other cases, however, it is also experiences of war that have not been overcome, mental pressures from the uncertainty of the asylum process, or the fate of family and friends which lead to the excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs. This pattern of consumption can, therefore, be interpreted as a coping strategy. People from countries of origin whose asylum application is unlikely to be successful tend to have no access to work or language courses. While the stakes of engaging in criminal behaviour for those with good prospects for asylum are very high, those who fear being deported may feel that they have little to lose if they are involved in criminal activities. Here, too, alcohol and drug use can play a role. Reportedly, there are also cases in which the structures of the asylum system themselves are deliberately used for criminal activity. In this respect, those involved usually have a link to existing criminal networks in Germany.

## Gender-based and domestic violence occurs even in supposedly secure refugee shelters

Gender-based and domestic violence occurs not only during the various phases of conflict and forced displacement but also in RSs in Germany, which should actually ensure protection. This is a grey area, and many cases probably remain unreported. Women and children, but also men, often do not feel safe in refugee shelters. In many places, such violence is enabled by spatial structures, such as shared showers without lockable cubicles, that do not offer adequate protection. The situation for women and girls who have fled their homes is also shaped by the structures of an asylum system that fails to protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. For example, transfers in response to gender-based violence to other refugee shelters to separate perpetrators and victims take

place without psychological support, while victims sometimes withdraw formal accusations of a criminal offence in the fear that “causing trouble” will have an adverse impact on their asylum application. A lack of information on individual rights thus compounds the pressure on victims.

### **Absence of minimum standards results in very uneven qualities of care**

Due to the absence of minimum standards for refugee shelters across NRW, the staffing ratio varies immensely from one shelter to another. For example, while one not fully occupied state-level shelter has 27 social carers supporting 89 refugees, there are municipal refugee shelters where a single social worker is responsible for 200 refugees. Likewise, the quality of support differs widely. The ability to recognise conflicts in good time, or prevent them from occurring in the first place, depends largely on the presence of qualified support staff on-site. Conflicts among residents can also arise as a result of the social carers being insufficiently trained. Lack of expertise may, for example, lead to residents being treated unequally or to an unconscious favouring of certain groups with certain language skills. The presence of security firms, in particular, is viewed with ambivalence: While some residents feel safe thanks to their presence, there is also a risk of abuse of power.

### **Lack of regulations to sanction misconduct is harmful to both staff and residents**

Along with the absence of binding minimum standards applicable to all refugee shelters, there are also no standard guidelines for the conduct of staff dealing with rule-breaking. In practice, sanctions range from talking to people individually to collective punishment and transfer to different rooms or other refugee shelters. This lack of consistency causes uncertainty among the residents as well as the staff.

Residents perceive inconsistent sanctions as arbitrary or interpret them as preferential treatment of certain individuals or groups, generating feelings of uncertainty and fear, while staff express a sense of helplessness.

### **Refugees try to regain their autonomy**

Despite the structural limitations of the asylum system, which obliges people to live in shared refugee shelters with the characteristics of a total institution, refugees living in this system do not lose their agency completely. We can observe various practices that show how residents make individual use of even the smallest scope for action. By decorating their rooms or by committing minor transgressions of the rules (e.g. smoking inside the centre), they attempt to reclaim some autonomy. Open resistance and forms of independent organisation are, however, rare.



## Introduction and research questions

Since 2011, the state (Land) of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) has taken in more refugees than any other part of Germany. Newly arrived asylum seekers are assigned to collective housing facilities organised at both state and municipal level. Although some people would have the means to live in their own apartment outside the system of refugee shelters (RSs), they are legally not allowed to do so. Although this rule theoretically only applies for the duration of the asylum procedure, it can still mean a long stay: The length of this process, as well as the over-stretched housing market, forces many people to live in a refugee shelter for between one and two years.

Since the peak of new arrivals in the second half of 2015, the occupancy numbers for RSs have fallen. Simultaneously, reports of conflicts in the media have decreased significantly. In fact, in 2016, the first year of this research project, it became clear that escalating conflicts, e.g. in the form of mass brawls, frequently reported in 2015 and early 2016, had become very rare. The majority of residents were by then living together without experiencing such incidents. Still, it must also be noted that the tensions continue under the surface, even if they do not attract media coverage, and lead to conflicts that can have a severe effect on residents' well-being.

In this study, we define conflict as an incompatibility of positions (Bercovitch et al. 2011, p. 3). This definition leaves open whether conflicts have a negative or positive effect, e.g. as a transformative conflict. In the context of RSs, conflicts can arise between individuals, between small groups or with the involvement of external actors, and they can manifest themselves in different ways. They can be internalised, be expressed by avoiding certain people or situations, but they may also be verbalised or escalate into physical violence. In the course of our analysis, five types of conflict in RSs have emerged:

- 1\ Conflicts at the individual level;
- 2\ Conflicts between different types of groups;
- 3\ Aggressive behaviour and criminality;
- 4\ Conflicts relating to family structures, gender and sexuality;
- 5\ Conflicts with staff and between institutions.

As a hypothesis, we suggest that conflicts which occur are not a mere collection of individual cases but should be viewed in the context of deeper processes that a) explain why particular types of conflicts occur again and again across different physical settings, and b) show how different types of conflict are in fact interconnected. To understand the triggers for and dynamics of conflicts we have, therefore, drawn on a number of theoretical approaches, above all from the fields of conflict research, spatial theory, (social) psychology, criminology, gender studies, sociology and social anthropology.

This study identifies three basic structural causes of conflict in RSs. They combine with other factors and act as significant triggers for the types of conflicts named above. The three structural causes are: The way the asylum regime operates \ > p. 18, the design and organisation of the physical and social space, \ > p. 19 and the specific nature of the accommodation system, which bears similarity to a "total institution" \ > p. 19. To analyse the underlying processes that lead to conflicts, this study poses the following questions: What causes of conflict can be identified in refugee shelters? And how can these processes be interpreted theoretically? It is essential to find answers to these questions if we are to develop a successful approach to conflict prevention based on sound empirical evidence and theory.

Our study aims to understand the reasons why RSs are so conflict-prone and to apply these findings in practice with the help of a transdisciplinary approach. Although the federal states in other parts of Germany have differing arrangements for their work with refugees, we believe that many of the conflict processes identified in NRW will occur throughout Germany and, indeed, are globally relevant. For this reason, we strongly hope for similar qualitative studies on causes of conflict to be carried out in refugee shelters in the Global South.

We understand refugees as a heterogeneous group of individual actors. Although all refugees in Germany must undergo the same asylum procedure, they otherwise differ even within groups of the same nationality, in terms of social class, educational

background, profession, ethnicity<sup>1</sup>, political beliefs, world view, age and sexual orientation. As far as conflict behaviours are concerned, refugees can be both victims and perpetrators. This observation stands in contrast to a tendency in the German press and the academic literature to portray refugees either as blameless victims/emancipated actors or as a threat to national security (Alaous 2015; Abdul Karim 2016; Haltaufderheide 2015; Lohse 2016). Both points of view, however, fall short. The latter generalises the nature of perpetrators and thus places refugees under general suspicion, which can hardly contribute to constructive changes. On the other hand, the perception of refugees as “victims”, or focussing on exceptions as “heroes”, dodges the issue of conflict among refugees. It neither offers a starting point for conflict resolution nor serves to protect victims. We argue, therefore, that a more differentiated analysis of the causes of conflicts must free itself from this highly political discourse to understand, from an objective and comprehensive perspective, how conflicts in refugee shelters arise and how they can be prevented.

## State of research

The literature on refugee shelters relevant for this study can be divided into three categories: (1) studies and academic literature on the situation in Germany, (2) key documents and position papers and (3) international reports and research literature on the housing situation of refugees, in particular in camps and urban settlements of the Global South.

Three points are striking here. First, research in Germany rarely reflects the decades-long experience of housing refugees outside of Europe, even though such a reflection would offer valuable opportunities for comparing institutional learning processes. Second, current conflict research largely focuses on the potential for violence either originating in the refugee shelters or being directed towards them from

the outside but treat these facilities themselves as analytical black boxes. There is, therefore, a clear need for detailed analysis of non-violent conflicts that develop between individuals, in families or between small groups and can escalate into violence in a worst-case scenario. Third, the perspective of refugees is still seldom analysed; in our study, we thus focus on the emic perspective of refugees.

### Box 1 Literature

#### Studies and academic papers on Germany

CDU Kettwig n.d.; FAZIT n.d.; Flüchtlingsrat NRW n.d.; Langenbach n.d.; Pieper 2008, 2012; Flüchtlingsrat NRW 2013; Müller 2013; Wendel 2014; Aumüller et al. 2015; Hagen et al. 2015; Rabe 2015; Schäfer 2015; Dilger et al. 2016; Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 2016; Ottersbach et al. 2016; Robert Bosch Expertenkommission 2016; Schammann & Kühn 2016; Scholz 2016; Bauer 2017; Foroutan et al. 2017; Lewek & Naber 2017; Vey 2018.

#### Key documents and position papers on accommodation in Germany

Marx & Bedford-Strohm 2016; MIK 2016; Mosbahi & Westermann 2016; Recht 2016; Bezirksregierung Arnsberg 2017; MIK 2017.

#### International reports and research literature (selected)

Crisp 2000; Human Rights Watch 2002; Lischer 2005; Ek 2006; Miseswitz 2009; Johnson 2011; Bohnet 2015; Martin 2015.

#### Violence protection concepts

Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz n.d.; AWO Kreisverband Kiel e.V. et al. 2016; Liga der freien Wohlfahrtspflege in Baden-Württemberg e.V. n.d.; Der Paritätische Gesamtverband 2015; Diakonie Leipzig 2017; Deutsches Rotes Kreuz Kreisverband Müggelspre e.V. n.d.; Plan International n.d.; Lewek und Naber 2017.

#### Reports and recommendations

Berlin Global Village e.V. et al. n.d.; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights n.d.; Plan International n.d.; UNHCR 2003, 2008, 2015; Deutscher Bundestag 2015; Rabe 2015; Caritas 2016; Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte 2016; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend und UNICEF 2017; Schouler-Ocak und Kurmeyer 2017.

<sup>1</sup> \ According to a social constructivist understanding, individuals belong to an ethnic group if their sense of belonging to a certain group is self-attributed or attributed by others. Nevertheless, ethnic identity is often subjectively perceived [...] as if it were primordial (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011, p. 70), i.e. as if it were grounded in a shared biological ancestry.

## Methodology

This study, which was compiled over the course of one year by three project team members, is based on empirical data collection and employs a combination of different qualitative social research methods. Before the actual data collection began, we further compiled an overview of incidences of conflict using a qualitative media analysis of various local newspapers to gain an idea of the most frequent cases of conflict.

### Sampling

To arrive at a comprehensive understanding of conflicts in refugee shelters, we opted for a sampling procedure selecting the most heterogeneous cases possible to reflect the wide differences that exist between accommodation situations.

The sampling of both refugee shelters and research participants was therefore carried out according to the principle of maximum structural variation (Flick 2002, p. 101; Kruse 2015).

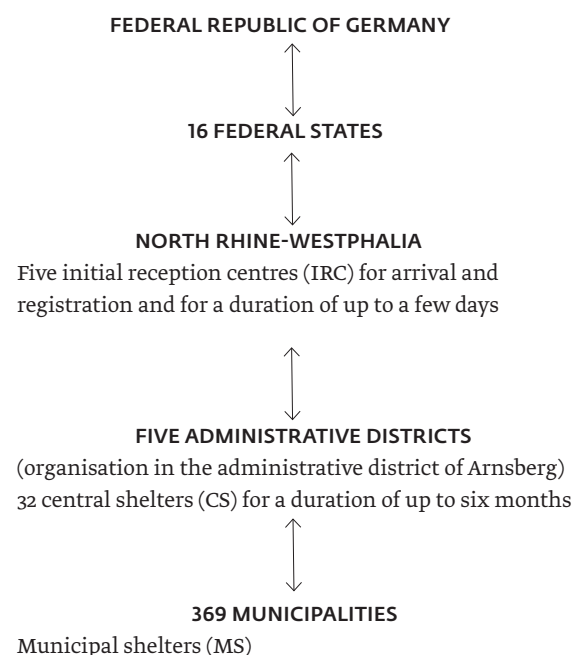
### Shelters

To ensure that the results of the study would offer a cross-section of the different circumstances found across the federal state (*Land*) of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), we established certain variables before choosing the RSs to be visited. We considered the following criteria:

- \ Municipal and state-level refugee shelters (seeking a representative ratio);
- \ Municipalities taken from several of the five administrative districts in NRW;
- \ Rural and urban settings of RSs;
- \ Locations in both structurally weak and economically strong areas of NRW ;
- \ Heterogeneous building types (e.g. schools, apartments, office buildings, gymnasiums);
- \ Varied sizes of refugee shelters (by occupancy);
- \ Heterogeneity of operators (municipalities, private companies, welfare associations).

**Figure 1**

**RS in the German administrative system (April 2016)**



### Research participants

At the level of the interviewees, we made sure our sample was as diverse as possible to take the different perspectives of the various actors involved into account. Accordingly, we carried out guided interviews and unstructured interviews with residents and staff (social workers, social carers, caretakers, security firms, cleaning staff) as well as with municipal actors, district government officials and volunteers. Moreover, it was important for us to speak to residents who differed in age, sex, origin and asylum status.

### Field access

As the responsibility for housing refugees lies with the municipalities and the regional administration, we first contacted the staff in charge to present the aims of our research project, to locate the RSs (since their addresses are usually not publicly

available) and to request an official research permit. It emerged that shelter management often had reservations concerning research projects so that we were at times refused authorisation entirely or only granted permission following negotiations. In some cases, management ignored call-backs, in others they referred to their lack of staff and time as well as an increasing number of such requests. All interview partners, whether staff or residents, participated in the survey voluntarily based on informed consent, and without remuneration. The team had previously established ethical guidelines for these interviews, which participants were informed about beforehand. Also, residents were informed about the project in advance with leaflets made available to them in twelve languages.

### **Combination of qualitative methods**

When visiting a shelter, we first carried out semi-structured expert interviews with the staff available. In accordance with the principle of structure vs. openness that applies in qualitative interview-based research (Kruse 2015), we first created an interview guideline, which was then tailored to the specific professional background of our interview partners (Bernard 2006, p. 212). In this way, we were able to ensure comparability while at the same time considering personal and professional differences.

Having completed the expert interviews, a transect (walk through the shelter with residents) of the accommodation took place (Schönhuth & Kievelitz 1994, p. 83). The intention of a transect is to generate data on the lifeworld of research participants within a relatively short period of time. Usually, a small group of residents (approx. five people) guided us through the shelter. The transects allowed us to get to know the shelter from the perspective of the residents. By visiting specific places of everyday life (e.g. kitchens, private rooms and outside areas), we were able to see these facilities from different perspectives and learn to understand their potential for conflict. The transects were followed by a focus group discussion with residents. The project team was able to use this opportunity to talk about triggers of conflict that

had not yet been touched upon. When necessary, we offered the participants to talk with us in further individual interviews.

To grasp the diversity of refugee shelters and the specific research situation, we repeatedly adjusted how we conducted the transect and subsequent focus group discussions. In individual cases, for example, we did a transect walk with staff members, when in others, we only spoke to residents but not staff. In some cases, we also had semi-standardised group discussions (Flick 2002, p. 180) not only with residents but also with other actors, such as municipal officials or volunteers. Numerous informal conversations were also triggered by our presence on-site, which we noted down from memory afterwards (cf. Bernard 2006, p. 211).

While collecting the data, we already identified a number of sensitive topics (e.g. domestic violence) on which we then began gathering further background information by means of expert interviews at counselling centres and non-governmental organisations. The expert interviews were partially recorded and subsequently transcribed; sometimes, we made notes during the interviews. As some refugees from authoritarian states are sensitive to formal interviews, project team members did not rely on questionnaire sheets in interviews with refugee participants so that they felt more at ease. Unless participants opted for electronic recordings, conversations with them were only written down afterwards from memory or field notes taken down during the conversation.

We also committed ourselves to observing strict anonymity in dealing with all participants. For this reason, neither the facilities we visited nor the municipalities are named in this study. This approach is intended to ensure that criticism would be possible without exposing individuals. This approach also served to avoid incentives for excessively positive accounts of the situation at that time. Drawing on this methodology, we visited 33 RSs over a period of six months (October 2016 to March 2017), with some on-site visits lasting several days. All in all, we interviewed 225 individuals.

### Limitations and positionality

As concerns the type of accommodation, we were not able to visit gymnasiums and temporary air domes that were converted into refugee shelters. This is one limitation of this study. Authorities refused us access to these facilities. However, only very few municipalities used this type of accommodation, which was only intended as a temporal emergency measure anyway, at the time of our survey. Through interviews with staff in counselling centres or staff who had previously worked in gymnasiums, as well as conversations with (former) residents, we were nonetheless able to obtain information on living conditions in these types of accommodation. Another challenge was the language barrier. As a project team we covered German, English, French and Arabic, but in rare cases, we had to call on the services of interpreters.<sup>2</sup>

As qualitative researchers, we are aware of our own positionalities (Flick 2002, p. 19). To avoid a gender-specific bias at least when covering sensitive topics, we visited all the RSs with two or more members of the project team. At least one female member was always present. As research in the context of displacement, in particular, raises ethical questions in dealing with people who need protection and who are traumatised, we created ethical guidelines for this study (involving informed consent/do-no-harm analysis) and attended a course in trauma sensitivity.

### Data analysis

All data was fed into the qualitative analysis programme MAXQDA (Kuckartz, 2010). In analysing the data, we based our approach on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) with its focus on coding and categorisation. With the help of open, axial and selective coding, we were initially able to create inductive core categories. At the same time, during the research process, we agreed deductively on analysis heuristics and sensitising concepts prepared from the literature and the initial research phase (Kelle and Kluge 2010, p. 28; Blumer 1954). The coding was thus oriented on inductive and deductive procedures of analysis. Finally, this data was amalgamated into the theoretical approaches explained below.

<sup>2</sup> \ On the methodological difficulties of doing interviews through interpreters, see Kruse et al. 2012.

# Framework: Living conditions for refugees in Germany and NRW

To situate the accommodation situation for refugees in NRW in its wider context, we will now briefly outline the asylum system and housing procedures. It should be noted in this respect that the approach to housing in Germany differs from one federal state to another. We will also introduce the issue of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders to highlight this concern before discussing our theoretical framework in the next section.

## Brief overview: Asylum in Germany

The conditions for refugee shelters in Germany are linked to the asylum system, which sets the legal framework for everyone who applies for asylum in Germany. While an application for asylum is screened, applicants are legally required to live in a refugee shelter. The trends recorded over the last six years show that the number of applications for asylum has almost doubled year on year. For example, in 2015, there were 476,649 applications, while one year later 745,545 applications were submitted. However, this upward trend ended at the time of writing (March 2017) with the number of applications in the first three months of 2017 decreasing by 69.2 per cent against the first quarter of 2016. On average 75.2 per cent of applicants are younger than 30 years old, and two-thirds of initial applications are submitted by men. In the first quarter of 2017, 22 per cent of applicants came from Syria, 10.3 per cent from Afghanistan and 9.3 per cent from Iraq. Other frequent countries of origin include Eritrea, Iran, Somalia, Nigeria, Turkey, the Russian Federation and Guinea. After entering Germany, refugees are distributed by the federal government among the federal states according to an allocation formula known as the 'Königsstein Key', which takes into consideration population density and economic indicators (BAMF 2017b). This means that refugees cannot choose where they will live. At 27.5 per cent, the most substantial portion of all applications for German asylum recorded between January and March 2017 were made in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), according to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge - BAMF, 2017a). When coming to NRW, refugees

first live in an initial reception centre (IRC), where they are theoretically obliged to stay for a couple of weeks only while they file their asylum application—in practice, this has often taken much longer. From there, they are transferred to central shelters (CS) and finally, when their asylum applications have been decided upon, assigned, again according to the Königsstein Key, to the municipality where they will live. In theory, their stay in these shelters should be limited to three (later extended to six) months. In practice, however, other factors such as the tight housing markets and the lack of language skills are reasons why refugees stay in such communal accommodation for one to two years.

Germany grants refugees various types of protection. According to the "Dublin Procedure" governing the examination of asylum applications in the European Union (EU), a person must claim asylum in the first EU country in which they were registered. If this was not Germany, refugees are transferred back to the member state through which they entered the EU. However, the Dublin Procedure was suspended in 2015 for Syrians—but not for any other nationals (Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration - Expert Panel of German Foundations for Integration and Migration 2017, p. 31f.). Applicants who are allowed to stay in Germany under the Dublin regulations may be granted refugee protection (Section 3 German Asylum Act - AsylG) in line with the Geneva Convention on Refugees (GCR). As the right to asylum in Germany is guaranteed under the constitution (Section 16a German Basic Law - GG), asylum seekers may be guaranteed this form of protection. Subsidiary protection (Section 4 AsylG) is granted if the other forms of protection do not apply, but the respective persons face a threat of serious harm in their country of origin. If no protection is granted, in certain cases a temporary suspension from deportation will still be issued (*Duldung*) (Section 60a Residence Act - AufenthG).

Reforms to asylum law in the past years (2014 to 2016) have significantly restricted the chances of receiving asylum in Germany. For example, the category of "safe countries of origin" (Section 29a AsylG), a list that includes countries that the legislators claim do not engage in political persecution, now include all EU



**Table 1****Types of residence and associated rights**

	Temporary residence permit (all applicants during the process)	Refugee protection under GFK/GG	Subsidiary protection (§ 4 (1) AsylG)	Prohibition of deportation (§ 60 (5)+(7) AufenthG)
<b>Length of stay</b>	Until end of asylum procedure	3 years	1 year (extension for two further years possible)	1 year (repeated extension possible)
<b>Settlement permit</b>	Depends on prospects of residence; decision of authorities, RS	After 3 or 5 years possible under certain circumstances	After 5 years possible under certain circumstances	After 5 years possible under certain circumstances
<b>Access to job market</b>	Limited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Permission from immigration authority required
<b>Family reunion</b>	No	Entitlement exists	Suspended until 16 March 2018	Not possible
<b>Number of decision notices issued in 2016*</b>	745,545 (100 Per cent)	258,256 (37.1 per cent)	153,700 (22.1 per cent)	24,084 (3.5 per cent)

\* One-quarter of all applications were rejected. In 12.6 per cent of all cases, a formal decision was taken, which means that the applications were stopped without closer assessment or were rejected. (BAMF 2017a)

member states, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro as well as Ghana and Senegal and even certain areas of Afghanistan. It means that asylum seekers from these nations have almost no chance of being granted asylum. The Asylum Package One, adopted in October 2015, further states that applicants will be housed in a central shelter for up to six months (previously three months). Asylum seekers from “safe countries of origin” are supposed to remain there until the end of the asylum procedure. It further states that applicants with “good prospects of remaining” in Germany are required to participate in integration courses and language classes, while those who have “poor prospects of remaining” do not have access to these services. Individuals from Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran and Somalia generally have “good prospects of remaining”. The Asylum Package Two, introduced in March 2016,

stated *inter alia* that family reunification is suspended for individuals who have been granted subsidiary protection for two years (Deutscher Bundestag 2016a). This means that relatives of individuals whose claim to asylum in Germany was successful cannot automatically also claim asylum. Since 1 August 2018, family reunification for individuals who have been granted subsidiary protection is possible; however, it is restricted to a maximum of 1,000 persons per months. The German Integration Act of August 2016 further restricts freedom of residence in that the federal states can assign refugees whose deportation has been suspended a place of residence during the first three years they are in Germany (German Bundestag 2016b). Table 1 provides an overview of the types of asylum that can be granted in Germany, and associated rights. Table 3 shows how many refugees were housed in a given type of shelter as of April 2016 (Ministerium für

Inneres und Kommunales des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen -MIK-, Internal and Municipal Affairs in North Rhine-Westphalia 2016).

Financial benefits are staggered according to family status and age; thus, an adult asylum seeker who is single receives 135 euro per month to cover their everyday expenses (Asylum Seeker Benefits Act - AsylbLG). Once asylum or subsidiary protection has been granted, individuals are entitled to regular benefits from the Job Centre.

Compared to previous years, the number of those who voluntarily returned to their countries of origin more than doubled in 2016 (BAMF 2017c). It is thus impossible to say how many people who originally registered as refugees there are in Germany. This is further complicated by the fact that, once asylum or refugee status has been granted, the official statistics list them as people with a migrant background. They are therefore no longer identifiable as a group.

## The shelter system in North Rhine-Westphalia

In Germany, the decision to establish collective shelters arose out of the necessity to create accommodation for hundreds of thousands of arrivals at short notice. Given such pressures, the types of buildings converted into RSs range from former schools, office buildings, barracks, hospitals, containers, retirement homes, hotels, post office buildings and community halls to emergency accommodation in the form of tents, air domes or gymnasiums. Until 2017, the latter were partially still in use due to overstretched housing markets. Some refugee shelters are situated in the countryside and very difficult to reach, others are in the centre of towns. The social environment can, therefore, vary tremendously as does the general design and quality of accommodation across NRW. There are, above all, big differences in staffing ratios between the state and the municipal level.

**Table 2**  
**Comparison between a municipal and state-run shelter (both fictitious)**

Comparison criterion	State-run shelter	Municipal shelter
Settings	rural	small town
Type of building	former barracks	former office building
Accessibility	fenced-in, ID check	open, no checks
Occupancy	300 individuals; 2016: 89	space for 250 individuals; 2016: 202
Service provider	welfare organisation	none (run by local authority)
Number of staff	50 (government, welfare, security)	3 (1 social worker, 2 caretakers, no security)
Social management	28 carers (incl. 7 social workers) and educational specialists); 24h support	1 social worker for 2 days/week
Room occupancy	6 persons/room	3 persons/room
Catering	communal meals at fixed times	communal kitchens (10 rooms/kitchen)
Sanitary facilities	communal facilities outside the actual building; lockable showers	communal facilities; 1 shared bathroom/hallway; toilets to be shared by men and women
Activities offered	sports courses, sewing circle, childcare, language courses, women's café, men's meetings	none



Employment opportunities and support arrangements (e.g. language courses, childcare, women's cafés or sport) around shelters also vary considerably. Binding minimum standards for the layout of rooms, shelters and qualifications of staff do not exist on the municipal level, although they do exist on the state level. There are provisions at the state level to set quality standards by means of a regular review of service specifications formulated in the tender process. Only the state's emergency refugee shelters are not subject to performance specifications (MIK 2016; Arnsberg Administrative District 2014, 2017). A complaints management system has, however, been set up. The structure of residents living in refugee shelters (RSs) shows a diversity of origin, age, gender and social class. Moreover, occupancy changes constantly. The different types of accommodation between the municipal and state levels are set out in Table 2, illustrated by two fictitious (due to the promised anonymity) but nonetheless realistic examples. In light of these differences, it becomes even more noticeable that certain conflicts occur in almost all refugee shelters.

**Table 3**  
**Type and number of refugee shelters in NRW\***

Type of shelter	Number	Occupancy	Capacity
Initial reception centre	5	1,235	4,855
Central shelter	32	9,314	16,983
Municipal	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown**

\* as of April 2016; \*\* Figures on this are not published

## A note on trauma

With regard to the accommodation situation in RSs, traumata and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) require particular attention. Conflicts in RSs, expressed through aggressive behaviour or addiction, may often be caused by underlying post-traumatic disorders.

Psychology defines trauma as “any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place” (APA, n.d.). So what does it mean for traumatised people to have to live together in confined circumstances and be confronted with an asylum system which creates insecurity?

Adjustment disorders, as well as acute and post-traumatic stress disorders, can be potential consequences of having experienced trauma. According to Kapfhammer (2005, p. 1302), acute and post-traumatic stress disorders are triggered by the severe experience of trauma and are characterised by avoidance behaviour, reliving the traumatic experiences and hyperactivity. PTSD can occur within just a few weeks after a traumatic experience or after a long delay of several years and then continue for lengthy periods of time. Furthermore, it is often accompanied by other psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety or addiction. Those affected experience flashbacks and have a changed perception of time. Long-term effects of PTSD can also take the form of self-harm, suicide attempts, eating disorders or substance abuse (Kapfhammer 2005, p. 1324). Whether PTSD develops or how it proceeds also depends on whether individuals who have developed PTSD are given psychological coping opportunities and resources for psychosocial support.

We can assume that most people who were forced to flee their homes have experienced traumatic events, for example in war zones or transit camps. Even so,

not all displaced persons suffer from PTSD (I114). Following the impact of the kind of violence experienced by many displaced persons, the general risk of developing PTSD is estimated at 20 per cent among all concerned (Kapfhammer, 2005, p. 1307). A 2006 study put the number of asylum seekers in Germany who have developed PTSD at about 40 per cent (Gäbel et al. 2005). According to a more recent study conducted in one central reception centre in Bavaria, approximately 64 per cent of the residents were diagnosed with trauma (Richter et al. 2015).

The conditions in refugee shelters further aggravate the difficulty of coming to terms with traumas. In order to stabilise patients with PTSD, a calm environment and privacy are required, which do not exist in collective refugee shelters. Staying in gymnasiums or air domes is therefore particularly problematic as there is no room for privacy. Another stress factor emerges from a feeling of helplessness and at being unable to make oneself understood due to language barriers. This may lead to desperate acts of threatening to use violence. In the case of one shelter we visited, for example, participants reported that a man who had suffered from severe depression threatened to kill himself and others in the shelter (I42).

The long duration of the asylum process (Laban et al. 2004) and uncertainty (Gerlach & Pietrowsky, 2012) are also risk factors that increase the development of psychological disorders. In 2015 and 2016, 148 refugees attempted suicide, and ten refugees committed suicide in North Rhine-Westphalia (Landtag NRW 2016e). The reasons for this remained unknown, and it is impossible to find out whether their PTSD or impending deportation may have played a role. However, Richter et al. in their psychological study claim that the number of suicide attempts among asylum seekers is significantly higher than in the general population (Richter et al. 2015).

Our interviews showed that the fact that some participants experience their exposure to long periods of uncertainty in conjunction with difficult shelter conditions in Germany as a continuation of the traumatic experiences undergone while being displaced

constitutes a high PTSD risk factor in itself (I114; I118). On the individual level, PTSD may manifest itself very differently from one person to another. While some traumatised individuals will overreact, sometimes aggressively, to external stimuli, there are others who withdraw from any social interactions. Even if there are social workers present in a shelter, they often fail to recognise an individual's need for psychological assessment or even stabilisation if the residents affected barely leave their rooms and staff cannot get to know them, not least due to the high number of residents (I114). The fact that the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act does not envisage psychological treatment is also problematic. Treatment only becomes possible once the asylum process is completed and asylum is granted, and when refugees have entered municipal shelters, but not earlier (Recht, 2016). However, for organisational and financial reasons, the treatment of PTSD proves difficult even then. Long waiting lists and language barriers make therapy more difficult (I07; I87). Indeed, even people who are already in therapy can only be stabilised with great difficulty in present shelter conditions and given the uncertainty that results from individuals not knowing whether they will be allowed to stay, or what their rights are. In this manner, and often while being separated from loved ones, they can rarely find inner peace and quiet.

It is thus evident that there is an urgent need for psychological support to be made available, which is presently not being met.

# Theoretical framework:

## Regime, space and total institutions

To explain why conflicts arise in refugee shelters and how these processes unfold, we have drawn on three overarching theories, the interplay of which forms the framework for our analysis. These are

- 1\ national and international asylum regimes, which set the framework for the daily life of refugees and housing conditions they find themselves in,
- 2\ the social relations of the social and physical space manifested in RSs and the daily lives of their residents, and
- 3\ the RSs characteristic as a specific type of space, which can be best grasped by Goffman's concept of the "total institution".

We shall now explain the three concepts and their interlinkages, before discussing in detail the effects of their underlying processes on the individual residents in our conflict analysis.

### Regime

Refugees who arrive in Germany are subjected to a system of various so-called regimes, which are highly complex and bureaucratic. The legal provisions which govern the housing of refugees in RSs are embedded in the national German as well as in the international asylum regimes. The terms "refugee regime" or "asylum regime" are understood to cover those regulations, standards, principles and decision-making processes which determine the respective national responses to refugee and migration movements (Betts 2015).

International agreements like the Geneva Convention on Refugees and their protocols establish the international framework in which national asylum policies are formed (UNHCR, 1967). Those countries that have ratified the Convention have translated its principles into domestic law and developed various mechanisms for implementing them. Added to that are specific regulations at the national level, which are often triggered by specific events, as seen in the case of the most recent modifications to German asylum legislation in 2015 and 2016 (e.g. suspension of the Dublin Procedures for Syrians).

In Germany, EU regulations, e.g. on the treatment of minors or particularly vulnerable refugees, also play a role (European Parliament, 2013). The national refugee regime can, therefore, be viewed as a sort of patchwork created under the influence of national and supranational law (Tsianos et al., 2009). This regime is the product of processes of negotiations between various actors whose behaviour is being shaped by the regime, while at the same time they are constantly changing it. A regime can, therefore, be viewed as a product of social conflicts and as an institutionalised compromise (Tsianos et al., 2009; Pott & Tsianos, 2014). However, the process of negotiating a regime is characterised by power asymmetries. Thus, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which often tend to pursue human rights-based approaches, find it more difficult to promote their positions than state actors, who stand for an approach shaped by security-policy concerns (Tsianos et al. 2009, p. 6; Pro Asyl 2016). The opportunities for those most affected, i.e. the refugees themselves, to participate in this negotiation process are minimal. On the contrary, those state institutions whose task is to enforce policy measures are absolutely predominant. Some of these measures thus take a repressive form, expressed for instance in the restrictions on movement and the obligation to live in shared refugee shelters. Consequently, the displaced realise that their daily lives are full of rules and regulations that they find difficult to understand and on which information is difficult to access. As has become clear throughout the field research for this study, these regimes have a profound impact on social processes and conflict constellations in the RSs.

Legal requirements such as the "*Leistungsbeschreibung*" (service specifications) which governs minimum standards in state-run shelters mean that the asylum regime also affects the way in which the interior of a shelter is set up. It hence defines not only the individual scope for agency of the displaced but also the physical space (the accommodation) in which they live. A regime perspective accordingly allows us to understand the multifaceted and, to some extent, repressive effects which arise from these requirements in the daily lives of refugees (Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010, p. 377f.).

## Space

Inside RSs, the concept of regime overlaps with the sociology of space. While the regime perspective describes the “multi-local, multifaceted and transnational co-production of sociality” (Pott & Tsianos, 2014, p. 117), space represents a medium for the formation and stabilisation of regimes. The requirements laid down by the asylum regime thus influence both the physical setting of the RSs, as well as the social dynamics taking place inside them.

We, therefore, look at space from two points of view. On the one hand, space is understood as the product of social relationships, which represent dense networks that are interrelated from the global to the local level (Massey 2009, p. 16f.). It means that spaces are constantly changing, as they are a product of negotiation processes and conflicts between different actors (Lefebvre, 1991; Gottdiener, 1993; Massey, 2009). As space is a fundamental precondition for human coexistence, it must also be understood as a space of interaction (Schetter, 2017). Thus Massey writes, “[...] space as a dimension [...] poses to us that most fundamental of socio-political questions: how are we going to live together?” (2009, p. 18). Individual behaviour, which is displayed in such a space, is always influenced by those power relationships which are reflected in the physical and social properties of that space (Massey, 2009, p. 22). In this study, power is wielded by the actors involved in the asylum regime. They organise the physical space of the RS and thus the setting in which its residents live and interact with each other.

On the other hand, we also take physical space into consideration. It encompasses the design of a building used for housing refugees, measured for example by size, room occupancy, provision of kitchens, bathrooms, washrooms and recreation facilities but also a facility's location and setting. Research in the Global South, in particular in camps and camp cities in Africa and the Middle East, has shown that in the context of refugee regimes, the design and organisation of space has a direct impact on individuals and human interaction (Ek, 2006; Martin, 2015; Misselwitz,

2009). The global and national asylum regimes translate into a daily reality at the spatial level and form the framework in which social dynamics and conflicts unfold. Thus the spatial organisation of RSs, as well as the social relationships occurring in this space, are determined by the asylum regime just as much as the space itself. In these two dimensions, space can potentially represent a major factor in conflict dynamics.

## The total institution

As the third component of our framework, we understand refugee shelters as temporary “homes” that share many characteristics of a “total institution”. Goffman defines a total institution as “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (2016, p. 11). In his analysis, Goffman refers to psychiatric wards, but he also includes other institutions such as boarding schools, elderly people's homes, monasteries and convents, or army barracks (2016, p. 16). A total institution is, as a result, “a social hybrid, part residential community, part formal organisation” (2016, p. 22). These are characterised by a set of rules which attempt to establish a fixed daily routine (2016, p. 17).

Refugee shelters can be considered as total institutions in that indeed, they serve as a place of residence for persons who find themselves in similar situations in that they all seek asylum, and who live in an enclosed and strongly regulated space. Among Goffman's examples, some institutions house residents who choose to live in a total institution (e.g. monks), while others are forced to do so (e.g. prisons). In some, residents are free to leave the institution temporarily, while in others, they are not. In this regard, refugee shelters represent hybrid institutions, where residents are obliged to live—they cannot choose otherwise—but which they are free to leave temporarily.

Refugee shelters diverge from Goffman's definition, however, in that he understands total institutions as places of residence and work. In contrast, refugee shelters in Germany are characterised by precisely the lack of (or severely restricted) work and accredited educational opportunities. Whether asylum seekers are being granted a work permit depends on their individual status, although generally, asylum seekers do have the right to apply for such a permit after three months (BAMF 2016b). Practically, however, language requirements and other such factors represent severe obstacles to taking up employment, while job opportunities are quite limited.

The degree to which life in refugee shelters is regulated can differ significantly. On the one hand, communal living is fundamentally regimented by a set of house rules. On the other, however, there are clear differences in the way they are set out. In large refugee shelters, there are prescribed routines, e.g. fixed mealtimes for communal meals or allocated shower times. In smaller refugee shelters, we often found the opposite: A lack of daily structure, which can prove psychologically difficult if residents have no access to employment opportunities, language courses, child-care or recreational facilities, or if such opportunities do exist, but are not being made use of.

By definition, all total institutions deny residents self-determination and autonomy, usually with reference to an overriding alleged goal, such as educating or healing residents (Goffman, 2016, p. 17). In German RSs, this is not the case formally, although some of our interviewees with shelter staff indicated that they did consider shelters as having an educating role. Also, Goffman points out that total institutions fulfil yet another function, namely that of surveillance (2016, p. 18), which includes bureaucratic procedures of registering residents. In this sense, refugee shelters are indeed a manifestation of the bureaucratisation of the asylum regime. In fact, a number of points show that RSs serve to monitor and control their residents. In refugee shelters, regulations—the implementation of which is supervised by staff—intrudes into the lives of individuals far more profoundly than it would be the case if refugee shelters were simply, for example, shared flats. Although

Goffman has been rightly criticised for, among other things, underestimating the individual's remaining potential for autonomous action (McEwen, 1980; Davies, 1989; Manning, 1992), his theory is nonetheless useful here to demonstrate specific principles according to which total institutions operate, and the effect of these principles on those who have to live within them.

These insights can make a significant contribution to an analysis of the development of conflicts in RSs.

## Conflict analysis

The conflicts in RSs identified in this research can be divided into five categories: Conflicts at the individual level, group conflicts, aggressive behaviour and criminality, domestic and gender-based violence, as well as conflicts between residents and staff and between institutions. We will now analyse these types of conflict in light of the theoretical framework outlined above.

### Conflicts at the individual level: Assault on the self

The process of entering the world of the total institution begins with a range of admission procedures which serve the aim of registering the resident and socializing them into the new living environment (Goffman 2016, p. 26). For refugees arriving in Germany, this process begins the very moment when they get in contact with German authorities for the first time. This can be at the border, in initial reception centres (IRCs) or other registration and arrival points. Here, personal and biometric data is recorded as proof of arrival. A health check also takes place in IRCs, which is used to register medical needs and prevent the spread of infectious diseases like tuberculosis.

#### Noise and a lack of privacy

Noise and lack of privacy mark the start of a process which Goffman describes as the “curtailment of the self” (p. 28). Individuals have no control over this process, and they cannot opt out of it. Most refugee shelters are designed as shared dormitories, which leave hardly any room for privacy—as in a total institution, individuals are never fully alone, are always within sight and often earshot of someone (Goffman, p. 33). Basically, life in a collective shelter is characterised by noise, the intensity of which varies depending on the type of building. In gymnasiums or air domes where the individual “rooms”, if there are any, are separated by partitions which are open at the top, there is a tremendous level of noise, a fact that makes everyday life very difficult. For example, once a baby has finally gone to sleep, it is then woken by other

children playing or noisy adults talking on their phone or listening to loud music (I61; I67; I116). Yet another factor is the different daily rhythms of the residents. Conflicts mostly occur in the evenings or at night. Some residents who do not have a regular daily structure may not go to sleep until five o'clock in the morning and so disturb other residents (I34). One staff member reported [in an emergency shelter with wooden partitions, but no ceilings] that “all the children are awake at night because the men are too loud. They Skype, or maybe listen to music or talk loudly, and that means there's lots of stress. [...] Because the sound level is simply, I believe, one of the biggest potential causes of conflict that exist in refugee shelters” (I44).

The problem of noise levels is perceived as particularly onerous in gymnasiums or buildings of a similar type but is also a problem in other collective refugee shelters (Scholz 2016, p. 154). One resident, a mother, reported that her six-year-old son, who was attending school, did not get enough sleep. First, it's loud, she said. Second, she often has to get things ready in the mornings or clear up in the evenings, and as they only have one room, they disturb each other (I13). Others complain that they do not get enough sleep to wake up rested the next morning, preventing them from fruitfully attending integration courses or school and learning German (I11; I73; I88; I98). Conflicts also arise more frequently in the winter months, when residents spend more time inside the shelters. In the summer months, outdoor facilities or excursions to the surrounding area ease the situation somewhat. Studies show that both men and women react to cramped conditions with a strong need for privacy, which RSs do not offer literally any room for (Regoeczi, 2008).

#### Subordination of the individual to the rules

Life in a total institution is typically restricted by the fact that individuals have to submit to the rules. Due to a shortage of space, or for fire safety reasons, there are tight limits on bringing in one's own equipment to add to the existing fixtures in refugee shelters or on arranging the accommodation in line with



one's own ideas. Notably, it is by no means the case that all refugees come from poor socio-economic backgrounds; in some shelters, e.g. medical doctors would share a room with truck drivers or farmers. But regardless of whether a person could afford, e.g. to buy an additional piece of furniture, a heater, or a fridge, they are not allowed to do so. Meanwhile, other features that allow individuals to express their own identity, such as the choice of clothing or a hairstyle become noticeably more important. This is in contrast to other forms of total institutions, where often, dress codes and uniform hairstyles are enforced. It can be observed just how important the residents' need to hold on to this freedom is when they have no other choice but to get second-hand clothes from the clothing store in the shelter. Even then, residents may reject donations that they do not like to—knowingly or not—retain a minimum of personal choice.

However, the loss of the independent self is reflected above all in the full effect of the asylum process, and partially in the interactions residents experience in the RSs with staff or outsiders. Thus individuals report that they are “viewed only as a number” (I63). One participant, who was 69 years old, told us that he used to be an esteemed business traveller in Europe, before his company and his house were destroyed in his home country. It was, he said, now painful to experience his reception as a “refugee”, i.e. being viewed in a completely different light and treated “like a nothing” (I83; I84). This reflects Goffman's finding that, after admission into a total institution, earlier self-identification is often no longer assigned any value, inhabitants suffer a “personal defacement” (Goffman, 2016, p. 29). It is also striking to see how staff often address residents with the familiar “Du”, as opposed to the more formal and respectful “Sie”. Conversely, only very few residents are permitted to address staff in this—less respectful—manner. As a result of the perpetual presence of other people and staff in shared dormitories, individuals lose their former identity not only in the way others perceive them but also their usual image of themselves (Goffman, 2016, p. 30). This loss of self is further exacerbated by the fact that residents, contrary to the

autonomy they had been used to, find themselves again and again in situations in which they are obliged to request permission (Goffman 2016, p. 45). For example, in some RSs, nappies for children or hygiene products for women have to be asked for, and any additional demand has to be justified (I08). Moreover, until refugee status is confirmed, residents have to apply for permission to travel outside the assigned municipality every time they cross its borders, even if they only intend to go to the neighbouring town.

It is also typical of life in a total institution that residents are deprived of the freedom to decide what information they want to disclose about themselves and with whom they want to share it. In the network of RSs, information about asylum seekers is exchanged among the relevant authorities and security providers. If deemed necessary, this information is also passed on to shelter staff without the consent of the person concerned. Such information can also be used for criminal investigations if, for example, the police are invited to attend the weekly handout of pocket money to seize a prosecuted resident (I60). Yet, intrusions occur into the private sphere of all residents. Bag searches on each return to the shelter and sometimes daily room inspections are common practice in many communal refugee shelters (I51; I109). What is more, personal beliefs and convictions or lifestyles that may, under certain circumstances, cause controversy can scarcely be concealed from other residents. Two interviewees, for example, were atheists. Both mentioned in our conversations that they had difficulties with individual fellow residents from whom they had to hide their convictions or who reacted with incomprehension when they spoke of it. As the fellow residents often asked them about their religion, they found it difficult to hide the truth (I88). To some extent, the enforced cohabitation also exposes single mothers and LGBTQI to a high level of social pressure\ > page 31.

### **Intrusion into the private sphere:**

#### **The asylum process**

The most drastic form of intrusion into the private sphere happens in the asylum process, which is implemented by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge – BAMF). In the asylum process, individuals are subjected to interviews that will be used to decide on asylum applications. Here, it is expected that individuals will state in detail the history of their displacement, including any potential traumata. In these interviews, deeply personal experiences are disclosed to individuals with whom the interviewee has no relationship of trust. Whether or not the interviewee finds the interviewer pleasant or whether there are any psychological barriers is not taken into account. This also applies to interpreters who are present during the interviews, which can present an additional problem. This is the case, for example, when they knowingly disregard professional ethics and translate incorrectly due to their own political or religious convictions, as it was reported to us in several instances (I07; I73; I100). Notwithstanding their own sensitivities, every individual is forced to provide statements because withholding information can result in the asylum application being rejected, followed by forced return and, in the worst case, death. Even if proceeding in that way can be justified for security reasons, it is nonetheless obvious that it will trigger feelings of shame, frustration and fear. Goffman speaks here of “exposures”, where a person’s “informational preserve regarding one’s self is violated” (p. 32). As a result, “the embodiments of self (are) profaned” (Goffman, 2016, p. 32). These effects are reinforced in cases in which applications are rejected even though refugees have provided their history, adding to feelings of guilt, hopelessness and anger (I41; I113). In many of our interviews, it became evident that the decision-making criteria of the BAMF are often unclear. Explaining BAMF-criteria such as the ranking of “safe” countries of origin to those affected is often impossible because the exact principles behind such categorisations are not made public, and laws change during the duration of the

application process. A further issue occurs in cases of PTSD as memory is often impaired: Frequently, the memory of the traumatic incident is missing, and consequently, a consistent narrative is no longer possible, making the applicant’s account appear implausible. This, again, leads to feelings of helplessness and guilt especially when applications are rejected.

Furthermore, it is problematic that BAMF assessment staff are not all qualified to the same standards; many who had joined the Office came from a wide range of backgrounds and did so at short notice especially at the height of new arrivals in 2015. BAMF staff often do not ask for details which applicants have not disclosed, but which are deemed essential to the process as they are not always aware of the relevance of these missing details (I41; Lobenstein 2017)—interviewers are no longer also decision-makers as a result of recent reforms inside BAMF. As a result of the above factors, in some instances, people of the same nationality from different regions and, in rare cases, even from the same family, have been granted different statuses (I19; I44). Applicants perceive such decisions to be arbitrary and unfair. Hence, the principle of equality, which is usually supposed to regulate life in a total institution, is violated, creating a fundamental prerequisite for frustration and conflict.

#### **Conflicts in everyday social interaction**

Complaints about a lack of cleanliness frequently lead to conflicts. Goffman talks here about a feeling of physical contamination (Goffman 2016, p. 33) that can arise, for instance, when residents have no other choice than to eat food which is foreign to them. This applies to shared refugee shelters which provide full board (I24; I42). Communal meals, particularly common in the state-level shelters, in which the standard “German” food is served may be alien to the eating habits of the residents. Some said they had suffered from stomach aches (I63). Many residents “make do” with the food on offer. Yet parents of small children find common meals particularly problematic in the daily routine, as there are no communal kitchen facilities. Sometimes they cannot even heat baby food or boil water for formula.



In other collective refugee shelters, residents can cook for themselves in communal kitchens and can, therefore, better meet their individual and family needs, which they perceived as very positive. This is how they can evade an assault on the self (Goffman 2016, p. 31). Nevertheless, residents and staff complain about filthy kitchens (I05; I17; I31; I61; I65; I98; Scholz 2016, p. 154) and generally hold other residents responsible for this problem. Cleanliness in communal bathrooms, i.e. toilets, washrooms and showers, is equally a “perennial issue” that residents and staff addressed during almost every visit we made to a shelter. Self-contained housing units with a kitchenette and a small bathroom are extremely rare in RSs. In many communal bathrooms, the sanitary conditions are inadequate (I20; I31; I44; I98; I101). During peak occupancy and busy arrival phases, this was due to the large number of people and different cultural practices of toilet use (I24, I104). One staff member compared the situation to motorway toilets: No-one wanted to sit on them, and users would often miss the mark (I14). Residents thus agreed in their dissatisfaction with the state of cleanliness. Conflicts arise because large numbers of people are using these bathrooms and some users are inconsiderate. Also, different cultural practices mean that, e.g. some residents would splash water on the floor of toilets as they were used to squat toilets with drainages, which Western bathroom design does not allow for.

Many staff regard the problems of refugees sharing collective space in shelters as similar to those found in many other communal institutions, where there are similar problems with cleanliness. Comparable types of residences may be house-shares (I14) or student residences (I65). The difference for residents of refugee shelters, however, lies in the fact that, in contrast to students, they are not allowed to move out of shared accommodation often for long periods, and must live with a very heterogeneous mixture of strangers in a cramped space. Goffman describes this mix of groups of different ages and different origins as a common practice in total institutions. This often leads to a person having to be in social contact with people whom they would have avoided entirely if

given a choice; in Goffman's words to “contaminative contact” (pp. 36-37).

Such interferences with one's self and the perceived “contamination” fail to corroborate their prior conception of self (Goffman 2016, p. 40). Moreover, the aforementioned forms of assault on the self often trigger a feeling of stress which can be produced by “loss of sleep, insufficient food or protracted decision-making” (Goffman, 1991, p. 51). All residents mentioned that the asylum process puts them under significant strain: they never know if a decision on their asylum application will arrive the next day or not for another year, or even if it has been lost in the mail. These questions are existential—they are responsible for the decision whether a person will be allowed to stay or will have to leave the country, which means they will potentially face prosecution or death. Such constant worries are reinforced by a high degree of information uncertainty. Many refugee shelters lack internet access, which, however, is vital to verify information especially if residents receive conflicting information on their status or rights, e.g. from the relevant authorities, shelter staff or volunteers. The lack of transparency, the lack of access to electronic resources, and being deprived of making any plans for the future as a result of this creates enormous pressure. Sometimes, this manifests itself in a state of paralysis, whereby residents feel unable to do anything. The lack of Internet access is particularly difficult to cope with because many residents have family members in their country of origin, i.e. often still in settings of acute armed conflict. At a time when the need to stay in close contact is greatest, the lack of internet access aggravates anxiety. According to several studies, this form of impeded contact can have an adverse effect on the psychological health of refugees (Mikal & Woodfield, 2015, p. 1329).<sup>3</sup>

Resentment and annoyance over these conditions is often internalised, as, typically, residents are not permitted to openly question the system—Again, this is implicit in the unspoken rules of the total

3 \ Many RSs have linked up with “Freifunkgruppen” (a non-commercial grassroots movement to support free wireless networks). This has proved to be a good way to solve this dilemma.

institution (Goffman, 2016, p. 43). This applies particularly to criticism of arrangements in the shelter itself. The opportunities for individuals to lead a self-determined and autonomous life, and to avail themselves of the same freedom to act as is enjoyed in the wider German society, are severely limited for the duration of the stay in the institution, if not removed entirely.

At the individual level, conflicts are usually either endured in silence or expressed in open quarrels. The likelihood of conflicts arising due to problems with noise or cleanliness depends significantly on the spatial conditions in a given shelter. However, the uncertainty and deprivation of rights caused by the BAMF asylum process and the nature of total institutions do not depend on the type of shelter and its physical design. They persist regardless, although they are exacerbated by the lack of privacy. Many of the processes outlined above lead to inner conflicts, which are barely visible from outside. However, whether consciously perceived or not, they do constitute important sources of conflict in the social interactions within the refugee shelters. In the next section, we shall look at their impact at the group level.

## Formation of and conflicts between groups

A further type of conflict concerns conflicts between groups of refugees. Media reports often claimed that certain ethnic or religious groups had “imported” conflicts from their home countries to Germany. It has thus been argued that certain groups must be allocated separate rooms, if not entire shelters (Spiegel Online, 2015). Following this approach, managers of some of the shelters we visited had placed groups viewed as particularly problematic in separate rooms or separate corridors. Another argument often voiced in favour of this practice was that the residents would thus be better able to communicate with each other. The residents themselves seldom told us about any open ethnic or religious conflicts. We did, however, hear statements to the effect that certain other groups within the facility were particularly hostile and were disliked. Exactly which

groups this referred to, however, varied from case to case. In this Chapter, therefore, we will use several examples from our field research to exemplify the criteria which form the basis for the composition of these groups, the factors which we identified as decisive for their formation and the conditions under which conflicts arose.

Groups are understood here as organisational units which, in certain situations, can form strong bonds among individuals. This can manifest itself, for example, in intensive interactions and communication, in a common identity supported by mutual solidarity and potential for joint action, but also the creation of strong barriers towards outsiders. Contrary to what is frequently assumed, groups are not fixed categories, but they are formed through negotiation and are subject to constant change (Brubaker 2002, p. 168ff.). In this respect, commonalities such as language, religious affiliation or the perception of sharing common descent serve as cultural markers for group demarcation (Chandra 2006). However, although these commonalities or markers exist, they do not consistently have the same meaning. Rather, they are activated individually and in specific situations. The formation of groups is, therefore, the result of interaction processes between individuals which is shaped by specific contexts and which draws on known categories that are either set by society or self-attributed (Stroschein 2016, p. 74). This explains why the formation of groups can be observed in all refugee shelters. Remarkably, however, it can take a variety of forms and lead to very different developments.

### Occupancy criteria as a cause of group conflicts

The criteria adopted by shelter staff for separating residents into groups are diverse. They are mostly based on ethnic, national (I11; I37; I65; I100), linguistic (I32; I64; I71; I104) or religious (I32; I74) attributes (I32). These attributes mostly appear to be assigned on account of “a gut feeling” and reflect the staff’s “common sense” knowledge. Caretakers or social workers often mentioned to us that this was down to “experience” (I17; I39). Separating residents into certain categories was often justified by the belief that

certain nationalities could not live together in one room because this would mean “war” (I04). The following nationalities were named as “incompatible”: Afghans and North Africans (I11), Afghans and Iraqis (I104; I106), Syrians and Albanians (I27), Eritreans and Nigerians (I14), Afghans and Arabs (I46), Moroccans and Syrians (I115), Moroccans and Iraqis, Macedonians and Albanians (I73), Iraqis and Iranians (I19; I64). Similarly, we heard reports of potential conflicts along ethnic lines, such as between Kurds and “other Arabs” (I04). In fact, Kurds and Arabs self-identify as different ethnicities. This list already shows that certain constellations are perceived to be prone to conflict in some refugee shelters but not in others. Identities are thus attributed externally by shelter staff who allocate rooms to ‘groups’ of residents due to criteria they set themselves. Problematically, this approach can reinforce group formation along such lines and create divisions among residents, which can ultimately lead to conflicts.<sup>4</sup> Yet, a trigger is needed to spark conflict.

One such trigger residents often mention is preferential treatment of certain nationalities over others by shelter staff. It was reported to us that in some shelters, caretakers or security service staff of a certain migrant background would single out members of “their” group to receive extra benefits in kind or would discriminate against members of other groups (I12; I67).<sup>5</sup> Conversely, social workers and carers from a migrant background more frequently mentioned that residents from their own national and/or linguistic background expected more favourable treatment from them (I73). In one case, Syrian residents also complained about racism displayed by a social worker. They alleged that he did not like Muslims and favoured other groups (I15).

A further problem arises through the fact that some divisions among residents, such as class or social status, do exist, but that staff are unaware of these. As a social worker told us: “In Afghanistan, there are various social groups, some considered superior and some inferior. Two single men were living

in one room, and one of these came from a higher-ranked group, the other from a much lower group. To us, it looked like they had formed a proper master-slave relationship. He had to do the shopping; he had to cook; he had to clean, while the other man suppressed him; it was really extreme” (I87). Staff did not notice this conflict for a long time, and it was only possible for this conflict to arise in this case because an externally imposed categorisation of both residents as “Afghan” misled shelter staff to overlook social hierarchies.

### **Hierarchisation as a result of the asylum regime**

By attributing different statuses to individuals, the asylum regime creates an additional hierarchisation of residents within refugee shelters, which can also trigger or reinforce conflicts. People from countries of origin with so-called good prospects of remaining (Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Somalia) more often receive asylum or subsidiary protection in Germany than, for example, people from so-called safe countries of origin, but also from Afghanistan. Within the relatively privileged groups, however, there are also inequalities. Syrians, for instance, have primarily received subsidiary protection since 2016 (previously they still frequently received full asylum status), while, for example, Eritreans usually receive full asylum status. Residents are aware that the different opportunities available to them on the job and housing markets depend on their status. These differences cause a lot of discontent and incomprehension among residents. Hence, several Syrians with subsidiary protection complained about how impossible it is to acquire the necessary German language skills needed to take up work or start studying and simultaneously moving into an apartment and applying for jobs given that potential employers and landlords are deterred by the uncertain legal perspective of the applicants. (I05).

We observed that by assigning certain rights to individuals going by their nationality, the asylum system has a twofold effect on group formation processes that can lead to conflicts. On the one hand, we found that members of a group that had formed in

4 \ This point will be expanded on p. 34.

5 \ See also p. 34.

this way showed solidarity among its members (for example, the Syrians who received subsidiary protection) and helped one another, e.g. by sharing information on the legal system. On the other hand, social carers often reported that envy between groups with differing legal status was a problem (I07; I44; I67; I87). For instance, some Afghans did not understand why their prospects of asylum should be slim when their country had suffered from war much longer than Syria (I31). The support on offer from volunteers often unintentionally reflects biases in the asylum system. Voluntary language courses, for example, were found to be dominated by an Arabic-speaking majority, which meant that other refugees, such as Eritreans, felt uncomfortable and no longer attended the courses (I37). There were similar reports about other activities (I07). Such circumstances can reinforce feelings of jealousy and discrimination.

#### **Racism and internal hierarchies along ethnic lines**

Social carers and social workers ascribe some conflicts to prejudice and racism among residents. In this respect, individuals from a Sub-Saharan Africa and Romani, mostly from the western Balkans, background, were very frequently named as victims of racism (I67; I87; I107). In some cases, our participants suggested that the children of Arab residents were taught to avoid contact with non-Arab Africans, at times resulting in some children uttering racist remarks (I07). In one shelter, conflicts arose among single women who were supposed to share a room: “There were huge conflicts because we asked Iranians and Kurds and Africans [sic] to move into a room together, and that was just unheard of [...]. Because black people are there, and you [as a Kurdish or Iranian woman] don’t stay in the same room as black people” (I67).

Conflicts of this type, however, were rarely expressed so openly. Instead, they mostly occurred at the level of everyday practices, which is often difficult for staff to discern. In one gymnasium shelter, for example, we were told that “the Africans” were always the last ones to stand in the queue at mealtimes. Residents from African origin were reported to also hold back in other ways in daily life, not wanting to attract

attention (I07). In one shelter made up of containers, “the blacks were always the very last in line” (I24). Residents thus behaved according to informal hierarchies, which are then internalised by those affected. As one social worker put it: “Well, the Syrians feel like they’re on top, they’re the best. Right at the bottom are the Albanians, in-between the Africans” (I37). These examples show that even though people from certain African states have good prospects of remaining in Germany, e.g. Eritrean nationals, they may still suffer from prejudice and racism inside the shelters, which to some extent reverses their favourable treatment in the asylum system. The fact that in many refugee shelters, Africans form only a relatively small group, might also play a role here. Hierarchies such as these are also reflected in who has the so-called 80 cent jobs, jobs created in certain shelters to mainly clean communal facilities and remunerated by the Job Centre. In several municipality-run refugee shelters, we found that such activities were taken on by women from western Balkan countries. Syrian women, in contrast, would not volunteer for this type of work.<sup>6</sup> Here, already existing attitudes towards other groups influence the social interactions in the shelters and can lead to conflicts if certain groups feel privileged over others (or are indeed advantaged by the asylum system). Such conflicts may be openly addressed or remain unspoken. Even though we were able to observe this in many cases, it is nonetheless often difficult for staff to recognise processes of this kind. Greater awareness and a better staff ratio are important here

We further found that group formation processes are also influenced by activities of diaspora and migrant organisations which already exist at the place of arrival. In our field research, this was particularly noticeable in the case of members of the Kurdish minority. Some of them quickly made friends in existing migrant organisations, which eased the burden when they started to look for apartments and jobs (I12). They also frequently showed their identity very openly in the refugee shelters by, for instance, displaying

6 \ These activities are, moreover, most often structured according to gender. Men appear not to want to take on these cleaning activities at all. Another possible reason for this is the difference in social class background.

the Kurdish flag, posters of Kurdish organisations or political figureheads (I06; I98). They also proudly asserted that they were Kurds, not Arabs or Persians (I12; I67). The examples mentioned in this paragraph illustrate how unequal access to resources and external influences might reinforce pre-existing group affiliations and exacerbate the risk of conflict.

### Formation of groups along religious lines

Processes of self-identification and external categorisations by group identities also manifest themselves in the formation of groups based on religious affiliation. It was noticeable that, during our visits to refugee shelters, members of religious minorities (i.e. mostly Yazidis and Christians from countries that are predominantly Muslim) made no mention of open conflicts with others. However, in two conversations with Christian refugees, but also in interviews with members of respective diaspora and migrant organisations, we were told that members of their faiths were often discriminated against in the shelters. For example, they were not 'allowed' to keep or prepare any pork in the communal kitchens, as individual Muslim fellow residents did not tolerate this. Drinking alcohol would also be problematic for the same reasons, although this is forbidden in most refugee shelters anyway. They also reported that individual Muslim fellow residents were very reserved or even hostile towards them (I76; I78). Social workers and carers mentioned lines of conflict between Yazidis and Sunni Arabs, and similar lines between Sunnis and Shiites (I67; I74). Notably, however, they could not give any concrete examples of confrontations along religious lines.

One special case, in this context, are those refugees who have converted to Christianity in Germany. Their conversion proved to be a particular source of conflict for both the entire group and for individual members. In all towns we visited, we were told about conversions to Christianity—almost exclusively by individuals from Iran and Afghanistan. We were given various explanations for this phenomenon. Some Muslim residents, but also some care staff, explained that refugees converted because they hoped their

chances of asylum would rise, as they are often slim for Afghans and Iranians (I67). Members of the Christian clergy whom we interviewed, however, explained the conversion of formerly Muslim refugees to Christianity as a result of a spiritual uprooting and disappointment in religious practices and policies in their home countries (I94). Refugee interviewees who had converted to Christianity told us that some Muslim residents had become distant and to some extent dismissive towards them. We were also told about actual hostility (I05; I91; I95). At the same time, we were able to observe that Christian refugees (both the converted and those who arrived as Christians) often benefitted from excellent voluntary support and assistance, e.g. through Christian congregations in places of settlement. Some of them found work and accommodation with Christian organisations, others were able to attend German courses, separately from the other refugees, organised by volunteers, and receive individual support from members of the congregation (I76, I78, I95). It seems likely that this phenomenon constitutes another type of group formation which is influenced by external factors and often accompanied by tension. When room occupancy and even support offered by volunteers is organised along religious lines, this may lead to a situation where residents primarily perceive themselves and are perceived by others in religious categories. In contrast, atheist residents, such as the ones mentioned above, do appear to be confronted with challenges similar to those of, say, Christian or Yazidi residents, but they receive no special attention.

These examples show that latent self-identification and feelings of belonging can be activated and reinforced by external attributions and unequal treatment in the asylum system. Whether the group formation processes outlined here develop into conflicts or not depends, however, on additional factors (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 35). These might, for example, be an increased feeling of insecurity, e.g. due to uncertainties about the asylum regime, or internal hierarchies. There is a relatively high probability that conflicts between groups formed in this way will occur (Stroschein, 2016, p. 76).



### **Positive cases where national and ethnic identity were rejected as categories for room allocations**

Some refugee shelters have consciously chosen not to separate residents according to nationality or ethnicity. Their experience has been positive (I37). Hence, there are rooms shared by individuals of different origins who get along well. One Eritrean, who was sharing with a Syrian and an Iraqi, told us he felt very much at ease and did not want to move in with the other Eritreans, as they quickly got into arguments with each other (I116). One social worker reported that residents were generally sceptical about new arrivals and preferred roommates from the same countries of origin because initially prejudices dominated (I14; I37). Yet, after a while, this criterion became less important, and preferences for sharing a room depended more on sympathies or antipathies of the respective residents (I14). Another social worker, who also spoke up against a separation policy, warned that better support would be necessary to address prejudices and to solve nascent conflicts before they could escalate (I37). Findings from research on ethnicity also suggest that conflicts can abate and disappear through continuous contact between different groups and shared daily routines (Stroschein, 2016, p. 75f.). A separation along ethnic or religious lines could also reproduce conflicts from the home country and previously acquired approaches to conflicts, which could make an individual's social integration into a society marked by a high degree of diversity more difficult.<sup>7</sup>

### **Aggressive and criminal behaviour**

Aggression and criminal behaviour can both be the result of conflicts at the personal or inter-group level and act as a trigger for further conflicts. It is noticeable that the escalation of conflicts into violence between entire groups occurred most frequently in 2015/16, which suggests that these incidents occurred above all due to overcrowding, with occupancy rates in some shelters soaring to as many as one thousand residents and resulting in considerable stress. The

fact that German authorities were overstretched meant that asylum procedures took far too much time, adding to the strain on the residents' nerves. We were told that staff in shelters also frequently felt overwhelmed by the conditions in which they had to work. In this atmosphere, fights erupted, sometimes over trifles such as a dirty tea counter (I104) or when queuing for food (I67). An already tense situation was exacerbated by language difficulties (I110).

Even though such major violent clashes have essentially ceased, aggressive behaviour still occurs in individual cases. Statistics show that the majority of offences are perpetrated by refugees against other refugees within RSs (Klingst & Venohr, 2017). This is not surprising in that incidences of crime generally tend to be higher in certain spatial conditions that further criminality (Weisburd et al., 2014). In shelters, this can be seen above all in facilities where rooms cannot be locked. Interviewees also often associated aggression and criminal behaviour with alcohol and illegal drugs. Conflicts often escalated into loud arguments, punch-ups or vandalism, while stabbings occurred very infrequently. Generally, research confirms that aggression is found to be fuelled by alcohol and reinforced by frustration and cramped spaces (Graham et al., 2000).<sup>8</sup>

We found that in some shelters, residents' substance abuse was factually tolerated because staff believed that smoking marijuana would calm down residents. However, for the vast majority of residents who do not consume illegal drugs, including those who are underage, this becomes an issue when they are exposed to passive smoking (I60; I99). Some residents reported that their complaints to staff proved to be pointless, while others, fearing the reaction of their roommates, avoided making complaints altogether (I84). Staff too sometimes said they felt helpless: "Residents are very, very afraid. And then, it is always difficult to identify specific culprits. Residents suffer, and if you go to the police with only vague

7 \ On dealing with a religious and ethnic plurality in Syria and the resulting potential for conflict see inter alia Wedeen, 1999.

8 \ Even though many studies have demonstrated a statistical correlation between the state of the built environment and deviant behaviour, a causal link cannot be unequivocally determined. Rather, it is plausible that interrelations between environmental factors and social relationships within a given space explain instances of deviant behaviour and conflicts. See, for example, Plank et al., 2009; Herbert & Brown, 2006.

information, they'll just dismiss it. The police aren't interested in catching users, they want to break up drug rings" (I89). Shelter staff list boredom, psychological pressures arising from uncertainty about the asylum process, the fate of family and friends as well as war experiences that individuals try to forget among the reasons why some residents consume alcohol and drugs excessively. In some cases, it was reported that residents take alcohol and illegal drugs as a type of self-medication for mental health issues (I29; I44; I80; I100; Kapfhammer, 2005, p. 1324).

For staff, it is not always clear whether aggression and the consumption of alcohol and illegal substances are due to PTSD. This results in the fact that, in some shelters, those who display such behaviour are punished by being excluded from the premises or transferred to another facility instead of receiving therapeutic help (I10). In cases of addiction, however, it is also difficult to convince residents to accept the support available: "Only a few with an alcohol or drug problem, or with mental problems [...] are capable of saying, yes, I really do have a problem, and I want to take up your offer of help. This is often a grey area, related to undiagnosed addiction or mental health issues" (I37).

Besides the issue of consumption, there were multiple reports of drug dealing. It is noticeable that in this regard, interviewees repeatedly mentioned certain nationalities whose prospects of success in the asylum process are poor, especially Moroccans, Algerians, Ghanaians and Afghans (I04; I29; I55; I97; I100). However, staff also emphasised that there are always individuals or groups to whom this dynamic does not apply: "[You] can't even say that drugs are predominantly a problem with people from Afghanistan because drugs are a big economic factor there. There are some men from Afghanistan who have never touched drugs in any shape or form and would never deal in them. And then there may be others who have always done drugs and who do them here as well. For them, it's completely irrelevant where they are housed or with whom they share a room. It's a part of their life, and that's how they act" (I89).

Warnings against stereotyping certain groups accused of criminal behaviour are undoubtedly necessary (Hudson, 2008) to avoid stigmatizing already vulnerable groups (Aas 2007). Yet, it is important to note that the observations mentioned here seem to confirm the hypothesis set out above that the refugees' knowledge about a lack of prospects can have an adverse effect on group formation—in this case taking the shape of criminal networks—as well as on the social behaviour of individuals. Since the asylum system categorises those seeking refuge by attributing different statuses to them, those who cannot hope for official recognition receive neither offers of support, such as access to language courses, nor long-term incentives to build a future for themselves. If, moreover, no deportation is possible because the countries of origin refuse to recognise the nationality of the displaced person, these individuals end up in a vacuum in which they live in one European country for a few years and then move to the next. This, again, increases their risk of becoming involved with criminal networks.

Theft—mostly of mobile phones and iPads—appears to be less frequent in refugee shelters with smaller room units than in open buildings without room units. In rare cases, there were reports of theft outside the shelters as well as of stolen goods being received and handled (I17; I104). In similarly sporadic cases, there were suspicions of prostitution (I04; I37; I42). Mention was also made, but just as rarely, of weekly pocket money being extorted from residents at knifepoint (I55). Twice it turned out that residents, out of anger and despair at not receiving any information on their asylum process or receiving a notice of refusal, threatened to set fire to the shelter—a threat that could, however, be averted (I24; I115).

We also heard few reports of child trafficking, primarily but not exclusively girls for forced marriage. The cases we are aware of concerned children who had arrived with their parents as well as children who, as it turned out, were travelling with adults who were not their parents or relatives (I55). Some of the cases referred to were handed over to the police,

although, certainly during the time of overcrowded IRCs in 2015, residents who were under suspicion disappeared from their shelter. These cases are alarming and make clear the need for better protection mechanisms for minors, which in the meantime have been adopted by the German government (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend und UNICEF 2017; Lewek und Naber 2017). The disappearance of residents was reported to us multiple times in the context of crime, although disappearances also occurred in cases where residents were exposed to possess multiple identities (I17; I61; I81). In contrast, we only learned of one case of suspected radical Islamic recruitment, even though this topic was raised in several minor interpellations.

Similarly, there have been reports of shelter staff committing theft and receiving and handling of stolen goods in shelters (Landtag NRW, 2016d, 2016g, 2016f; I12). Reporting such cases puts residents at high risk. Due to insufficient language skills, they cannot make themselves clearly understood, and there have been cases of other shelter staff and the police giving more credence to statements by security staff involved in such activities than to those made by residents. In the worst case scenario, a resident could be at risk of deportation for allegedly making a false statement (I12). The dependency of residents on staff, which is reinforced by a fear among refugees that resistance will negatively impact on their asylum process, makes a critical and impartial examination of every individual case all the more urgent.

The examples given show clearly that shelters are not secure spaces but that residents are directly exposed to the aggressive or even criminal behaviour of others. Interviews have shown here, too, that staff are often unaware of existing conflicts or do not know how to respond to these. In fact, many residents we interviewed said that even though they were relieved to have escaped from war, they did not feel safe in refugee shelters.

## Gender-based and domestic violence

Gender-based and domestic violence is a type of conflict which centres above all on the situation of women, children and non-heterosexual individuals. Refugees who leave their regions of origin and change their cultural contexts are confronted with many changes, one of these being new gender roles. Such changes may be triggers for newly arising cases of gender-based and domestic violence, or the latter may already have occurred earlier.

In the social sciences, domestic and gender-based violence are explained as follows: “[...] domestic violence means physical, sexual, psychological, verbal aggression and also aggression towards objects, which, according to societal beliefs go against the expectations of (mutual) care and support” (Schneider, 1990: p. 508; in Lamnek et al., 2012, p. 3). For analyses of domestic violence, hierarchical family structures, the personal behaviour of perpetrators and societal structures all play an important role. Accordingly, individual aggression, which is frequently displayed by men, often reflects the dominant gender structure in a society (i.e. patriarchy).

To compare, “[s]exual and gender-based violence is understood to be violence which is carried out against the will of a person and is due to their socially assigned gender [...], which includes physical, emotional, sexual and psychological acts, attempts and threats” (Krause 2016, p. 202). Some forms of violence, such as sexual abuse occurring within a family could fit both into the concept of domestic violence and the concept of gender-based violence. Beating children within the same household would be categorised as domestic violence, while sexual harassment in the washrooms of a shelter would fall under the category of gender-based violence. During our interviews, we were told about the following forms of conflict and violence that can be subsumed under the concepts of domestic and gender-based violence<sup>9</sup>: domestic violence against women and children, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, forced marriage and trafficking of children and women.

9 \ Gender-based violence can of course also be perpetrated against men (Krause, 2015, p. 7; Lamnek et al., 2012, pp. 190–220) or lesbian, gay, bi, trans\*, inter\*, queer\* (LGBTIQ) people. Having said that, no cases of this kind were described to us.



Perpetrators act from a position whereby structural conditions in society privilege them, and they are often convinced that subordinating women is their right (Brückner, 2006). “The use of physical violence as a means of coercion means the rapid establishment of a hierarchy and thus an order” (Lamnek et al., 2012, p. 22). Findings from peace and conflict research also indicate that sexualised violence must be understood as social and culturally constructed acts that can be committed to achieve specific ends, e.g. humiliation of the victim (Krause, 2015, p. 1). In their totality, they are best understood as a continuum of violence, not only during the various phases of actual conflict in the country of origin or forced displacement but also in refugee camps (Krause, 2015, p. 2). Sexual and gender-based violence thus can continue long after the initial displacement, turning on its head the idea of a refugee camp or shelter as a place of sanctuary and safety.

### **Spatial conditions for gender-based violence:**

#### **The layout of shelters**

One factor which facilitates the occurrence of gender-based violence is the architecture of many shelters (Rabe, 2015). Only very few communal shelters have bathrooms that are directly accessible from shared rooms. Instead, toilets and shower rooms are often located on shared corridors or the outside, frequently in separate containers. Some showers cannot be locked from the inside. One shelter we visited counted 90 per cent of male residents, and it had shower facilities that were external, unlockable and were positioned in a public, highly frequented location. Furthermore, women’s and men’s showers were located directly next to one another, separated only by a wall that was actually open at the top. Women in this shelter were reported to only use showers when going in groups, or with their male relatives waiting outside.

This spatial structure thus creates a feeling of insecurity. Residents and outsiders can theoretically get into a shower room as there is no security service to keep strangers off the premises (I61). Such rooms can also be potentially dangerous for children: In another

shelter, the shower rooms were located in a labyrinthine cellar, and children were sent there on their own to shower (I14).

In some shelters, residents’ own rooms cannot be locked (while some 4 to 8 persons might be sharing a room). In the state-level refugee shelters, the reason given for this situation is that staff must be able to gain rapid access, e.g. to prevent a resident with a post-traumatic disorder from harming themselves (I46). We also heard of rooms that cannot be locked in municipal refugee shelters (I10). What is more, men often dominate the public spaces in the shelters, while women tend to keep to their rooms (I08). Not all shelters have separate recreation rooms for women. In certain types of buildings, especially those of lightweight design and gymnasiums, the lack of privacy in the “rooms” is an additional problem. These cubicles are generally separated merely by partitions and open upwards so that other residents can easily look in from a bunk bed in the neighbouring room. In one gymnasium not even partitions were allowed for fire safety reasons so that the residents had to hang their towels in front of the bunk beds to gain at least a modicum of privacy. The social worker there said: “Then the municipal public inspectors come along unannounced, carry out their checks and tear everything down that’s hanging down; and every little centimetre of space that a resident may have somehow gained is then squeezed back again to make room for emergency escape routes” (I07). This lack of privacy in shelters without doors that can be locked represent a risk to women, and in rarer cases also to men.

The residents of these types of refugee shelters develop various strategies to address this lack of privacy and security which can make everyday organisation much more difficult. One woman, who lived alone in a room with her children, was scared to leave her room after seven o’clock in the evening. From this time onwards she and her children used a bucket when nature called (I08). In another shelter, which houses predominantly men travelling alone, there are (lockable) shower and toilet containers outside. Although there is also one toilet on a corridor in

the shelter, it is located in a purely male section, so that the few women who live in the building do not dare to go alone. In one case reported to us, if the mother needed to go to the toilet during the night, she woke her husband, who accompanied her there along with her children, whom she did not want to leave alone in the room (I22; I24). By now, both state-level and some municipal shelters are ensuring that there are separate facilities or separate corridors for residents in particular need of protection, such as women travelling alone. Civil society organisations are also demanding that this kind of spatial separation be created (Io8; I10).<sup>10</sup>

### Gender relations and violence

Gender relations, in which gender-based violence is embedded, form an additional category of analysis. Among refugees, some will call patriarchal societal and family structures learnt in their country of origin (Ghanim, 2009) into question upon arrival in Germany. In some cases, women see that other female roles are possible and begin a process of reorientation. One trigger for this can be the desire to gain some control over the household income, as usually the social benefits for the entire family are transferred to the husband's account. In the shelters, some men demonstrate their power over their wives by expecting them to remain in their rooms and thus under their control. If women cook in the common kitchen, it is hardly possible to avoid meeting other men—a situation that some husbands react to with jealousy (I87). In some cases, the pressures on women are not only exerted by the family or the husband; other residents from the women's respective country of origin also exercise social control and urge a woman to stay with her husband or accuse the husband of not having his wife under control (Io8; I59). Some husbands/men would interpret these incidents as a loss of masculinity, which they would partly express in

sexualised violence to regain the power they think they have lost. It is precisely in the context of economic, social and political restrictions and structures of dependency that men use sexual and gender-based violence to defend their hegemonic status, as research from refugee camps in Uganda has shown (Krause, 2015, p. 4).

Problematically, dominant gender relations in Germany combined with regulations of the asylum regime can also hinder the prevention of gender-based violence, as the following example illustrates. The staff of an advisory organisation told us about a client who was housed in a gymnasium with her brother and her mother as well as her six children. The woman had already experienced violence at the hands of her husband for fourteen years and had arrived in Germany without him. Her mother urged her to return to her husband; her brother became violent towards her and was consequently expelled from the shelter. Bowing to pressure from her mother, the woman then agreed to her brother returning. The brother became violent again, and the woman was transferred to another emergency shelter. There, as a woman travelling alone and a single parent, she had to rely entirely on herself. What was more, despite the violence she had experienced, she did not receive adequate assistance. At one point, she disassociated, lost consciousness and had to be taken to hospital. In the meantime, her husband arrived in Germany, and the authorities decided that the father should take care of their children. After the end of the mother's stay in hospital, the family was housed together—against her wish. She then had to justify to the Housing Department why she no longer wanted to live with her husband. When, after two years, the husband left Germany they were divorced (Io8).

This example clearly shows the interplay between prevailing gender relations and domestic violence. The wife's family adhered to a hegemonic masculine understanding of status in which the woman has no right to leave her violent husband. Here, it was not only the men (husband, brother) who exercised violence but also the mother, who inflicted psychological violence on the woman in question. In this case, staff

10 \ Separate housing for LGBTIQ is also being discussed. However, we were also told of cases in which same-sex couples were housed in normal refugee shelters without any discrimination or conflicts occurring. (I42; I87). In one interview it was reported that a gay man was allocated a single room so that he was not exposed to bullying from other residents (I27); in another interview, we were told that not only other residents but also the caretakers had a critical view of homosexuality (I67).

in the German administrative system were also influenced by the ideal of the nuclear family being together, according to which a wife and mother belongs to the family, and must, therefore, be housed together with her violent husband. She cannot separate from him without justifying her wishes in front of the authorities. By the heteronormative ideal of the nuclear family, children belong to the parents, while the father's propensity for violence is disregarded.

At the same time, the asylum regime plays into this at a structural level. The wife cannot make her own decision on where she lives but must resign herself to the decision taken by the authorities. In another case, a woman had been granted asylum while her partner, who comes from a different country, had not. As she had suffered domestic violence from his hands, she wanted to leave him, but would then have had to accept her partner's deportation (Io8). In both cases, the situation of refugee women and children as victims of domestic violence was aggravated by the asylum regime and the uncertainty and long waiting times associated with it.

### Violence against children

Domestic violence can also be directed against children. A study for the whole of Germany found that 10 per cent of the refugee shelter's staff surveyed said that children had been victims of violence (Lewek & Naber, 2017, p. 25). They frequently reported adults hitting their own or others' children (Io4, Io7, I24, I33, I44, I73). Although this can be interpreted as a result of different ideas on how to raise children (Lancy, 2008, 178f.)<sup>11</sup>, here, too, physical structures of shelters and the asylum regime feed into this outcome. Cramped accommodation is a stress factor, as one social worker working with refugees in a gymnasium said: "You can't control your child here in the gym. Every five minutes someone complains that the child was there and stole this and did that and at some point, you just don't know what to do any more [...], the situation just builds up" (Io7).

<sup>11</sup> \ According to Lancy, corporal punishment of children is widespread above all in societies characterised by violence and undergoing modernisation and urbanisation processes (Lancy, 2008, p. 179).

It is highly challenging to deal with these types of violence. If the perpetrator is transferred to another shelter, women still often find themselves in an unstable situation, having to endure pressures from other residents who are from the same region as her and disapprove of her decision to separate. Because they are scared, women frequently withdraw formal complaints they have made.

To sum up, it can be said that gender-based and domestic violence, understood as a continuum of violence that reaches all the way into the very structure which promises protection, is facilitated by a multitude of factors. These include individual aggression, patriarchal social structures and gender relations, hierarchical family structures, the spatial situation in collective shelters as well as the structural conditions of the asylum regime.

### Conflicts with staff and between institutions

Each type of conflict discussed above presents a significant challenge for staff, provided that staff can recognise conflicts as such (cf. e.g. social hierarchies, racism). However, the relationship between residents and staff can itself also trigger conflicts. A fundamental characteristic of total institutions is that staff and residents are separated in their roles and rights (Goffman, 2016, pp. 18–19). In many cases, however, the structures of the asylum regime, with all the different agencies (BAMF, municipalities, etc.) and their specific responsibilities, are not clear to residents. As a result, staff are sometimes accused of giving preferential treatment to certain residents when those individuals receive favourable assessment notices and can move into private housing, although shelter staff are not responsible for this at all.

Furthermore, it is problematic that in refugee shelters, the composition of staff varies significantly from one facility to another. As to staffing ratios, drastic differences exist, especially between state-level and municipal shelters. For example, in one state-level facility, which is not fully occupied, we found 27 social carers looking after 89 refugees. In contrast, we encountered a municipal facility where just one

single social worker was responsible for 200 refugees (I121). The presence of sufficient numbers of staff is important because staff can frequently intervene and ensure that an emerging conflict is “nipped in the bud”. In one state facility which employs high numbers of staff, and where the staff know the residents well, violent altercations have thus been prevented: “The situation escalated. [...] It didn’t come to a big punch-up. They were really on the brink of it, standing nose to nose. And I happened to know one of them really, really well. So I grabbed him and said, come on, let’s have a smoke and you can tell me what happened. And maybe we’ll find a solution. And then we went straight out” (I104).

#### **Use of security services: A double-edged sword**

Security staff are supposed to prevent conflicts, or at least the escalation of conflicts. Staff and residents perceive the presence of security staff as at least partly positive. In one case, a resident made a point of saying that there was no security service where he lived—in a former school—and he wished that there was because as it would prevent the current situation of uncontrolled access to the building, even at night. It scared him (I62). There is also a risk of abuse of power. One Iranian citizen reported his experiences in a gymnasium where he observed security staff, mostly of North African, Syrian Kurdish and Turkish descent, drinking, smoking hash while on duty. He also claimed they instructed residents to steal items of value, mostly mobile phones, and were then selling them on. In accordance with this “patronage” (Goffman 2016, p. 53), security staff permitted Arabic-speaking residents to use common rooms even during nightly rest periods. This really disturbed the other residents, he said. He added that security staff behaved arrogantly, walking through the facility in uniform with truncheons raised, hounding and intimidating residents, bossing them around. They were able to exercise power arbitrarily and without supervision. This observation reminded us of the findings of the Stanford Prison Experiment. According to this study, there is a tendency for people who are made guards to abuse their powers (Zimbardo, 2005). This behaviour

is reinforced by the interplay of the structural characteristics of total institutions and the asylum regime itself. The interlocutor told us that the other residents had not dared to say anything for fear that this could affect their asylum prospects. He, on the other hand, tried to raise these grievances but, because of language problems, could not make himself understood and had therefore not succeeded (I12).

#### **Skills shortages and absence of coordination mechanisms**

Conflicts with staff can also arise when they suffer from internal conflicts, which can—consciously or unconsciously—result in them treating people unequally. During the peak refugee arrival phase in 2015, many social carers were newly hired, many with a migrant background. Some were even former refugees themselves, hired because of their native language skills. They came from widely different areas of employment (e.g. teachers (I04), hairdressers or bus drivers (I109)). In the shelters, as in other areas of social work, a professional understanding of the right balance between closeness and distance is essential. In many facilities, however, this professionalism is often lacking. If staff identify too closely with the refugees and have not come to terms with their own potentially traumatic experiences, keeping a professional distance can be particularly tricky, as some of the examples above show (I46, I10). Staff found trauma training very helpful to prevent potential secondary traumatisation. This training also prepared them for dealing with traumatised refugees and for supervising staff (I46, I114). Such training, however, is seldom offered.

The mixing of job roles due to the low staff ratio causes problems for other staff, as one caretaker reported: “Really we’re social workers, security services, and then we’re caretakers” (I65). Especially at the municipal level, volunteers often take on tasks that ideally should have been provided by public services as there is too few official staff. This practice blurs the lines between voluntary and professional work (I19) and makes it less likely that professional standards are adhered to.

Another cause of conflict is the lack of coordination among staff. Given a lack of handover logs or regular team meetings between social workers, caretakers, security and administration staff, who work on different shifts and for different employers, it is no wonder that residents receive conflicting information or that knowledge of conflicts among residents is lost (I42, I104, I120). The same applies, for instance, to residents' health needs. Although this is vital information, it is not automatically exchanged between shelters and the authorities when residents are transferred, e.g. from state shelters to municipal shelters. This leads to long waiting periods for treatment and increased psychological stress.

A clear hierarchy of power in favour of staff prevails, and there is a lack of standards relating to the transfer of information between institutions. This makes the presence of qualified staff all the more important to prevent conflicts from escalating. Finally, the fact that competition among accommodation operators stands in the way of an open exchange of experiences and stops them admitting that they have made mistakes is also problematic. There are valuable opportunities for facilities to learn from one another to improve present practice, but this requires less competition and the creation of constructive frameworks for collaboration and knowledge exchange.

## Problem-solving and sanctions

In this conflict analysis, we have established that there are no uniform regulations on how to handle conflicts and violations of house rules. Rather, staff deal with problems and apply sanctions in very different ways even within the same shelter. We found different approaches to solving specific problems. If communal kitchens or bathrooms are dirty, residents are sometimes given an “80 cent job” as a cleaner. Other institutions hire cleaning firms or put a cleaning rota in place (I14), although not everyone sticks to it. According to one social worker, no-one feels responsible for dirty sanitary facilities. Instead, she said, everyone blames everybody else (I14). If verbal warnings do not work, a common practice is to lock up really filthy communal toilets. “At first it’s hard on residents, but by the time the third person needs to urgently use the toilet there is a rethink. After that, everyone cleaned it together. It sounds harsh now, but once the caretakers followed through on it, it didn’t happen again. It then just became clear that the next time the caretaker said the toilets look bad, you need to get yourselves together: I don’t care who cleans them, but otherwise I’m locking up again” (I24).

Caretakers frequently punish residents for failing to clean up communal kitchens by “withdrawing electricity”, and it is only switched on again after the kitchen has been cleaned. But this punishment means caretakers face a dilemma as they are interfering with the residents’ identity, their self (Goffmann 2016, p. 30). One caretaker reported feeling uneasy doing so. “Then they ask, when are you turning the electricity on. [...] You have to go up and say, with a grown man and a grown woman in front of you, that this isn’t really nice either, it’s not clean here. And you feel a bit stupid. But you have to see it through.” (I33). These collective punishment measures are meant to increase the social pressure on the residents (Goffman, 2016).

However, if rules are clearly being violated by an individual, the sanction must apply to the person in question. If residents return to the shelter drunk and aggressive, they are usually banned for several hours. In cases of non-violent conflict, residents may be moved to other rooms. Residents will be transferred

to a different facility, however, if they threaten others, are violent or commit a crime. In NRW, there are certain refugee shelters to which ‘troublemakers’ can be assigned—with varying outcomes. In some cases, being transferred has the effect of calming a resident; in others, it leads to them forming groups in another facility and then posing a new danger to other residents or the staff.

From the residents’ point of view, inconsistent sanctions reinforce the impression of arbitrary behaviour or preferential treatment of individuals and groups as well as a feeling of insecurity and fear. Staff frequently reported that they felt helpless. Even in cases of criminal or aggressive behaviour which exposes other residents and staff to risks to their lives and well-being, incidents are often not severe enough for the perpetrator to be locked up. Hence, offenders either remain in the shelter or the person and with this, often the problem, is transferred to a different shelter, but the problem itself is not solved. Perpetrators who are aware of the lack of consequences are often those who are under the impression that they have nothing to lose anyway. All those concerned expressed great frustration with this situation.

Those who are a danger to themselves and others due to mental health issues are a special case in this context. One security staff member reported that during the peak phase of arrivals, one resident had attacked and injured him with a razor blade. The police took the assailant away, he said, but an hour later his attacker was back in the shelter. The man was not given any further help, the staff member continued, even though it was perfectly clear that his attacker suffered serious (psychological) issues. Another time, he said, a resident had cut himself all over his body with a razor blade. The ambulance took him to accidents and emergencies, but a few hours later he was also sent back to the shelter (I110). In both these cases, as in many others, no other professional help was provided.



## Resistance

Despite the restrictive nature of the asylum system and life in a refugee shelter, residents develop various strategies to cope with their situation. Many, and we must emphasise this, integrate quietly into the system. However, resistance is, in fact, an important component of the concept of total institutions. Acting against implicit expectations becomes an expression of the rejection of the identity which the total institution attempts to attribute to the individual (Goffman, 2016, p. 279–280). Thus, staff may tolerate people breaking the rules, partly on the assumption that breaking the rules is making the entire system more bearable and so contributes to its preservation (Goffmann, 2016, p. 274). Thus, acts which violate the house rules of a shelter or the higher level regulation set by the authorities, e.g. fire safety regulations, appear in this context to be more than simply rule-breaking. These behaviours include smoking in the rooms, which is universally prohibited but frequently done. In all of the institutions we visited—whether there was a ban on alcohol in place or not—we always found some residents who drank alcohol there, which was obvious from their conspicuous behaviour or the empty bottles (I17). Moreover, although drugs are forbidden in all facilities, drug use was repeatedly encountered.

Another widespread form of resistance is the washing and drying of laundry in rooms and hallways, although residents should use rooms set aside for washing machines and dryers in the shelters to avoid damp and mould. We often came across the use of small electrical devices in rooms, such as radiant heaters or hotplates, even though they are strictly forbidden under the fire safety regulations. In one case there was even an improvised hearth made of bricks (I33). As a reaction to dirty toilets, some residents would remove the door handle after using the toilet and take it back to their room to ensure they had a private toilet in a communal washroom (I05). Finally, it is also common for coal used in hookahs (shisha pipes) to be heated on the rings of an electric cooker, although this is strictly forbidden for fire safety reasons as well. Attempts to decorate rooms or even to create privacy in dormitories using towels express

attempts to make impersonal and strictly regimented living spaces more liveable (Agier, 2003).

One other strategy which clearly expresses resistance can be found in individual attempts to be transferred to a single room by staging a conflict. The person concerned assigns themselves the role of victim; sometimes this strategy seems to have been arranged between two residents (I17, I67). Finally, the attempt to form close relationships with staff is another coping strategy.

It is noticeable that, after the initial admittance period, little solidarity appears to exist among residents and cohesion is frequently limited to the formation of the small groups previously mentioned. Open resistance (Scott, 1985), such as a hunger strike or protests against the generally poor conditions in a shelter, overly hot rooms, or the quality of food in large facilities, is very rare (Landtag NRW 2016a, 2017, 2016b, 2016a). Here, too, residents said that they just have to put up with any shortcomings and their hands are tied. Complaints mechanisms do now exist in most facilities. Even though some good has come of these mechanisms, one must make sure that they are not only used in places where the residents already have a good relationship with the responsible staff (I106, I100). Even if some of the staff are just as critical of the asylum system and seem just as helpless as the residents themselves, they are seldom open to criticisms of the accommodation situation voiced by residents or external parties. With few exceptions, residents do not dare to criticise (I01, I02). Structures for self-organisation, like those initiated in some camps and facilities in the Global South, might enable residents to participate constructively in the decision-making process (Misselwitz, 2009), but they are a rare exception in NRW (I117).

## Conclusion

This study shows that conflicts in refugee shelters do not represent a mere agglomeration of individual cases. Rather, they can be traced back to deep-seated structures. In this respect, the asylum regime and the spatial conditions in which refugees live act to reinforce conflicts, or in many cases serve as their initial triggers, in conjunction with the institutional structures of a refugee shelter. At work here are tightly interwoven processes which indirectly shape what happens inside the shelters and which the individuals involved are often not aware of. Nevertheless, these processes have a major influence on residents and staff and are exacerbated by high occupancy rates. As these processes are created by the system and independently of the decision-making of individuals, they can be classified as systemic or structural causes.

### Systemic or structural causes

Examples of systemic conflicts can be seen in the inner conflicts experienced by many residents as they pass through the asylum process. They are often forced to tell strangers about traumatic experiences. Because of the length of the process and the lack of transparency, residents often live with uncertainty for a long time. When this uncertainty combines with the experience of noise, cramped conditions and loss of privacy in a refugee shelter due to constant, unavoidable interaction with other residents, it can re-traumatise individuals or extend their traumatic experiences and feelings of stress. To achieve any stabilisation of those affected, it is imperative that they gain a sense of safety and security, but this cannot happen under such conditions. The way the process is currently designed holds a potential for conflict that can hardly be overestimated. Both residents and staff at almost all the refugee shelters we visited confirmed this. This finding indicates that the BAMF asylum process must become much shorter, more transparent and sensitive to individual cases.

However, this study also shows that to a certain extent systemic causes combine with other causes of conflict. One example of this are group formation processes among residents, often involving the

formation of hierarchies. Even though existing prejudices and attitudes towards certain out-groups play a role here, group formation processes are reinforced by the effects of an asylum regime that differentiates by country of origin when granting asylum status. The resulting distinctions between different groups and different access to resources depending on this increase the potential for conflict. Staff, sometimes unconsciously, reinforce this group formation dynamic by using opaque criteria for assigning rooms or by treating certain residents more favourably. In effect, the order created by the asylum system can yet again be reproduced unconsciously by staff and volunteers. However, racism among residents may also override structural forms of discrimination, as our examples show.

Residents showed solidarity and a willingness to help one another shortly after arriving. Conflict-driving processes appear, especially in municipal shelters, i.e. they take off only when the hierarchy established by the asylum regime, by unequal access to resources and by varying accommodation conditions has come into being. Hierarchical group formation can initiate undesirable self-identification processes that undermine a culture of tolerant interaction among residents and even beyond the time spent in a shelter. Ideally, right from the initial placement in a shelter, we should be working towards respectful coexistence in an open society, for example by not just paying lip service to the principle of equality but actually living equal treatment. Structural factors, however, conflict with this goal.

Moreover, the duration of the BAMF asylum procedure must be significantly shortened, made more transparent and more sensitive to individual cases. The way the process is currently designed holds a potential for conflict which can hardly be overestimated. Residents and staff of almost all of the refugee shelters we visited voiced this criticism. Equal access to language courses and job opportunities for people with differing legal statuses would also be a step towards preventing conflicts between groups.



Yet, not all conflicts are driven by the three systemic causes discussed above. Domestic and gender-based violence, for example, typically arises at another structural and personal level. Our study showed that this form of conflict already existed in part before people became refugees. Only in part did it first occur in a refugee shelter. However, we do find here that personal causes of conflict are exacerbated by the physical and structural features of RS and by cramped conditions, stress and boredom.

## Trajectories of conflict

As for the trajectory of a conflict, it became clear in our study that conflicts sometimes develop over long periods of time and often remain undetected by staff, until they finally openly erupt or escalate into obvious violence. In some cases, however, we found that staff are consciously or unconsciously involved in the emergence of conflicts or exacerbate conflicts because they fail to ensure equal treatment of all residents. This finding is grounded in our analysis of group formation and staff attitudes. In cases where residents perceive staff to be partisan or biased, it is less likely that these residents will express their grievances or take the initiative in seeking help. Under the conditions of a “total institution”, which are reinforced by the restricted legal status of individuals in the asylum process, the relationship of dependency of residents on staff is particularly strong. This heightens residents’ need for protection. Equal treatment by staff and transparency are therefore indispensable for peaceful coexistence in a refugee shelter.

Paradoxically, this conclusion runs counter to the fact that staff sometimes find their hands tied when it comes to rule violations, misconduct or crime because the sanctions available to them often do not work. The state has a duty of care towards asylum seekers, which means that expelling someone from the accommodation system must not be used as a punishment. Financial penalties are also rarely feasible because of the low amount of pocket money residents receive. Precise and uniform mechanisms for

sanctions are lacking, and this gives residents an impression of arbitrariness and injustice. It can also exacerbate conflicts arising in social interaction. We can, therefore, conclude that binding sanction mechanisms are urgently needed as part of an equal treatment approach to conflict prevention.

Moreover, in dealing with conflicts, but also in organizing daily life in general, another problem that came to light was the lack of straightforward working routines and coordination mechanisms among staff. There are no clear, regulated procedures for the exchange of information between administrations, municipalities and actors at state and municipal levels. It is a shortcoming that also leads to conflicts. Clear mechanisms for transferring information are urgently needed. Indeed, it is generally important that, on the one hand, the scope for action in a refugee shelter, which is already limited in such total institutions, be shaped by fair and transparent regulations. On the other hand, any regulatory regime must protect residents’ personal autonomy and allow them to have their say. This necessary empowerment would also be helped by enabling greater interaction with the wider society during time spent in a refugee shelter, not just as part of projects targeted exclusively at residents as refugees but also for the sake of their basic humanity.

## Coping strategies

With conflicts defined as an incompatibility of positions, it is evident that conflicts do not necessarily have to be negative. The example of refugee women who have been demanding their rights demonstrates the transformative character of conflicts. However, in this case, standing up for one’s rights leads to further conflicts if, for example, husbands do not condone the emancipation of their wives.

Finally, residents come up with various coping strategies to deal with the conflicts they are facing. Some attempt to integrate silently into the prescribed structures and not to draw any attention to themselves. Conversely, violations of the house rules and

the resulting conflicts with staff can be a strategy of resistance, expressing the individual need to lead a self-determined life. Having said that, leaving literally no room for such individual expression is a typical characteristic of total institutions. There are also some residents who manage to use the system to their advantage. And, in addition to those whose resistance turns into aggressive or criminal behaviour, there are also residents who have been harmed by their previous experiences and simply cannot endure the pressure of the situation. They have either already arrived with a mental health issue or they develop one over time. Some give up after a while and decide to leave Germany.

We encountered a widespread feeling of disappointment and disillusionment among refugees in shelters, which presumably amplified the individual processes described here. This diversity of responses highlights the necessity of understanding refugees not as a homogeneous group, but as individuals meeting the challenges of their life in Germany in many different ways. This approach demands that each case be treated individually. This cannot be achieved, however, without ensuring an appropriate staff ratio of carers to residents and providing sufficient training and professionalisation opportunities for staff. This point applies in particular to the municipal level, which must be granted more financial support to improve.

The conflict analysis set out here is, however, not only relevant to the situation across Germany in other federal states but may prove useful in part to conflict prevention efforts at refugees in camps in other parts of the world. In Germany, conflict prevention and a reform of the present system must focus on the structural change as well as at the concrete level of the physical design of housing to ensure that, in future, arrangements for living together in refugee shelters are conflict-sensitive.

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# Interviews

- \ I01: Family in a municipal shelter (MS).
- \ I04: Focus group with volunteers, a female caretaker and a male social worker from a MS.
- \ I05: Focus group with changing participants.
- \ I07: Female migration advisor.
- \ I08: Female staff members of an advisory organisation.
- \ I10: Female staff members of an advisory organisation.
- \ I12: Male resident of an MS.
- \ I13: Female residents of an MS.
- \ I14: Female social worker of an MS.
- \ I17: Male caretaker of an MS.
- \ I19: One male social worker of an MS.
- \ I20: Notes on a visit to a refugee shelter.
- \ I21: Male resident of an MS.
- \ I22: Family in an MS.
- \ I24: Female social workers and male volunteer coordinator of an MS.
- \ I27: Female social workers of an MS.
- \ I29: Former resident of an MS.
- \ I31: Male resident of an MS.
- \ I32: Male caretaker and two male social workers of an MS.
- \ I33: Male caretaker and male security service staff member of an MS.
- \ I34: Focus group with residents of an MS.
- \ I37: Female social worker of an MS.
- \ I41: Focus group with staff of an advisory organisation.
- \ I42: Female manager of an MS.
- \ I44: Female staff member of an advisory organisation.
- \ I46: Social carer of an initial reception centre (IRC)
- \ I51: Focus group with residents of an IRC.
- \ I55: Male manager of a former emergency shelter.
- \ I58: Female volunteer refugee advisor.
- \ I59: Male integration assistant.
- \ I60: Notes on a visit to a shelter.
- \ I61: Notes on a visit to a shelter.
- \ I62: Notes on a visit to a shelter.
- \ I63: Focus group of residents and male caretaker of an MS.
- \ I64: Female social worker.
- \ I65: Male caretaker of an MS.
- \ I67: Female social worker of a private operator.
- \ I70: Focus group with residents of an MS.
- \ I71: Male manager of an MS.
- \ I73: Male manager of an MS.
- \ I74: Male manager of an MS.
- \ I80: Woman travelling alone in a decentralised shelter.
- \ I81: Female social worker employed by the town.
- \ I83: Male volunteer
- \ I84: Male resident of a decentralised shelter.
- \ I87: Focus group with town employees, social workers and representatives from help desks.
- \ I88: Resident of a an MS.
- \ I89: Focus group with town employees, social workers and representatives from help desks.
- \ I94: Male Church employee.
- \ I97: Resident of an MS.
- \ I98: Residents of an MS.
- \ I99: Focus group with residents of different refugee shelters and volunteers.
- \ I100: Female administrative district staff and staff from a private operator.
- \ I101: Focus group with residents of a central shelter (CS)
- \ I104: Female social worker and social carer from a CS.
- \ I106: Administrative district staff and staff of a private CS operator.
- \ I107: Cleaner in a CS.
- \ I109: Male manager of a CS
- \ I11: Male social worker of an MS.
- \ I110: Focus group with staff of a CS's security service.
- \ I111: Male staff member of a CS's security service.
- \ I113: Female staff member of a CS's security service.
- \ I114: Female staff member of an advisory organisation.
- \ I115: Municipal actors from the town and associations.
- \ I116: Interview with field notes from a shelter.
- \ I117: Support team of an MS
- \ I118: Trauma training.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AsylG	<i>Asylgesetz (German Asylum Act)</i>	AsylG
AsylbLG	<i>Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz (German Asylum Seeker Benefits Act)</i>	AsylbLG
AufenthG	<i>Aufenthaltsgesetz (German Residence Act)</i>	AufenthG
BAMF	<i>Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees)</i>	BAMF
BICC	<i>Bonn International Center for Conversion</i>	BICC
CS	<i>Central shelter</i>	CS
EU	<i>European Union</i>	EU
GG	<i>Grundgesetz (German constitution)</i>	GG
GRC	<i>Geneva Refugee Convention</i>	GRC
IRC	<i>Initial reception centre</i>	IRC
LGBTIQ	<i>Lesbian, gay, bi, trans, inter, queer</i>	LGBTIQ
MS	<i>Municipal centre</i>	MS
NRW	<i>North Rhine-Westphalia</i>	NRW
PTSD	<i>Post-traumatic stress disorder</i>	PTSD
RS	<i>Refugee shelter</i>	RS
UNHCR	<i>UN Refugee Agency</i>	UNHCR

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